

Perceptions on the Implementation of the Integrated Territorial Investment Mechanism (ITI) and Its Impact on Sustainable Development and Resilience of Danube Delta*

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Abstract

The Integrated Territorial Investment mechanism (ITI) was implemented in Romania to the territory of ITI Danube Delta in the 2014-2020 programming period. In this respect, the present article aims to analyze the process of implementation of the ITI mechanism on the Danube Delta territory in order to find out the impact of its implementation on the socio-economic development of the area and on its resilience, as well as the main problems encountered by the responsible authorities for managing this programme and the beneficiaries of these funds. The research methodology consists of a survey conducted by using two questionnaires designed by the authors. The study had 42 participants from the fund managers' category and 71 participants from the beneficiaries' group. The study revealed a positive perception among all the participants which considered that ITI impacts the resilience of the Danube Delta territory to a medium extent. The most important problems encountered in the implementation process were the pre-financing process, the guides' conditions that are not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs and the public procurement process. The research revealed a high degree of satisfaction from both types of respondents regarding the ITI mechanism and a good relation between the managing institutions and beneficiaries.

Keywords: Danube Delta territory, ITI mechanism, cohesion policy, sustainable development, resilience.

1. Introduction

The territorial dimension was one of the Cohesion Policy's priorities in the 2014–2020 programming period (Szilard and Lazăr, 2012). In this respect, the policy supported measures for stimulating employment, social inclusion, education, competitiveness and institutional capacity development, using new tools such as integrated strategies (the Integrated Territorial Investment – ITI – mechanism). The purpose of using integrated approaches was to support sustainable local development, to strengthen cities' resilience and to improve the use of the European funds (Kogut-Jaworska, 2019).

In Romania, the ITI mechanism is implemented in the Danube Delta territory. The focus of ITI is linked to the thematic objectives as stated in the operational programmes. Besides the specific issues regarding the urban areas within the ITI territory, ITI Danube Delta tries to solve the problems of the rural areas within the same territory. Therefore, the ITI targets mainly issues such as: innovation and competitiveness, environmental protection, renewable energy and low carbon economy, regional disparities and employment, maritime challenges, IT&C, being considered a main factor of territorial governance. The reason for introducing the ITI mechanism is that the cohesion policy should focus more on the territorial or place-based dimension and should consider more the specificities of each territory. Because the cohesion policy aims to enhance territorial governance, the ITI mechanism was created in order to approach all the problems encountered within a single territory using only one programme.

This approach promotes the cooperation between administrative units and the implementation of common projects, facilitating the absorption of non-reimbursable EU funds.

In this respect, the main objective of the present research is to analyze the process of implementation of the ITI mechanism in the ITI Danube Delta territory and the main problems encountered by the responsible authorities for managing this programme and the beneficiaries of these funds so as to determine if there is an impact of this programme on the development and resilience of this area.

The article is structured in four main sections: introduction, followed by the second section which presents the literature review regarding the development of the Integrated Territorial Instruments in the European Union, followed by the description of the research methodology (section 3) and the main findings of the study related to the perception of the beneficiaries and employees responsible from the management authorities regarding the implementation of ITI mechanism and its impact on the Danube Delta territory (section 4). In the last section, there are conclusions and recommendations.

2. The development of Integrated Territorial Instruments in the European Union

By the end of the 1990s, OECD (2001) proposed a new approach of the regional policy where competitiveness and economic cohesion could be better achieved using regions' endogenous potential based on three principles: 'endogenous development (aimed at enhancing territorial units' own opportunities for expansion); sustainable development (aimed at reconciling the objectives of economic efficiency, social cohesion and ecological balance) and more accountable governance' (OECD, 2001, p. 27). This represents the place-based approach where the administrative boundaries of a region are less important, the attention being focused on the regions' potential, development barriers and main challenges (Barca, 2009; OECD, 2009). Studies in the field suggested that the cohesion policy's interventions would be more effective if the sectoral and solidarity approaches would be replaced with interventions aiming to stimulate regional potential. Using regions' endogenous potential means to introduce the territorial dimension, to create intersectoral interventions and develop a multi-level governance system as to achieve competitive advantage at regional and national levels (Musa and Petak, 2015; Kaczmarek and Kociuba, 2017; Muksin and Avianto, 2021).

The implementation of the Cohesion Policy did not have the expected results in the 2007–2013 programming period and its interventions did not generate permanent economic growth (Rodríguez-Pose and Fratesi, 2004; Gorzelak, 2014; Nyikos and Kondor, 2019). Consequently, in the 2014–2020 programming period, the most important elements of the Cohesion Policy were the place-based approach and the multi-level governance (Szlachta and Zaucha, 2012; Mendez, 2011; Van der Zwet, Miller and Gross, 2014; Smékalová, 2018). The policy introduced new tools in order to support the endogenous potential of regions and countries (Camagni and Capello, 2015) and the place-based approach was introduced in the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010). The cohesion policy aimed to focus on results and maximize the impact of EU funding instruments using thematic concentration and a strategic and integrated approach.

In this respect, considering the need for strengthening the integrated approach in the EU, the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) tool was created, by combining policies, sectors and funds. ITI introduced the urban dimension to the Cohesion Policy (European Commission, 2014), being considered a driving force for integrating activities that will lead to urban areas' sustainable development (Kociuba, 2018).

The ITI mechanisms' purpose is to introduce the concept of thematic concentration by channeling the cohesion policy's interventions on strategic areas in order to determine regions' long-term competitiveness. The interventions are limited to particular categories of intersectoral activities which respond to urban areas' needs and problems (Kociuba, 2018).

ITI mechanisms are implemented in 19 EU countries, using different thematic, geographic, financial and organizational approaches (Binek *et al.*, 2016). 14 out of 19

countries use ITIs to achieve sustainable urban development. In Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia the mechanism supports functional urban areas while in Belgium and Germany it is only applied in some selected regions. Spain, Romania and Portugal implement the mechanism in their coastal areas while in Finland, ITI supports the development and implementation of the Six City Strategy. More than that, the number of established ITI territories varies among Member States. In Romania there is only one ITI territory – the Danube Delta, while the Czech Republic created seven ITI territories (Marin, 2017; Kociuba, 2018).

The financial allocation of the Integrated Territorial Investments was €13.8 billion in the 2014–2020 period. The European Regional Development Fund financed €11.8 billion, the European Social Fund funded €1.7 billion and €0.3 billion were allocated through the Cohesion Fund. Almost 80% of this allocation was concentrated in nine Member States. Poland received the highest allocation (€3.8 billion) and Romania received €1.11 billion (Marin, 2017).

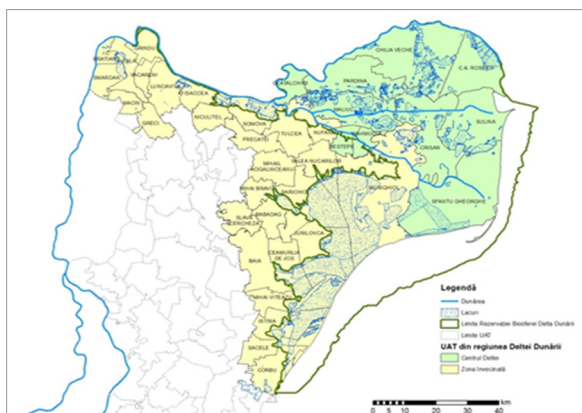


Figure 1: Territory covered by ITI Danube Delta

Source: The Integrated Strategy for Sustainable Development ITI Danube Delta (2016)

In Romania, the ITI instrument has been applied to the territory of ITI Danube Delta (presented in Figure 1) which brings together seven rural administrative units and one urban area in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, urban and rural administrative-territorial units partially located on the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve territory from Tulcea and Constanța counties, as well as one town and eight communes located in the vicinity of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (Government of Romania, 2016).

The introduction of this integrated approach in the Danube Delta territory might also have a positive impact on sustainable development and resilience within this area.

Resilience refers either to a system’s capacity to absorb disturbances or shocks and keep its basic functions and structures (Walker and Salt, 2006; Radu, 2018; Țiclău,

Hințea and Andrianu, 2020) or the capacity to adopt and implement changes in order to evolve to a new state of equilibrium (Folke *et al.*, 2010). Other authors (Carpenter *et al.*, 2001, p. 765) considered that resilience of a system can be described following three characteristics: '(1) the amount of disturbance a system can absorb and still remain within the same state or domain of attraction, (2) the system's capacity of self-organization, and (3) the ability to build and increase the learning and adaptive capacities'. These characteristics lead to the idea of persistence, because in its efforts to surpass the shocks' impact, a system will try to maintain its main characteristics and functions. Persistence is the element that links resilience with sustainable development because the purpose is to develop prosperous systems for the future (Pisano, 2012). Financing measures which lead to a sustainable socio-economic development of the Danube Delta communities might help at strengthening their resilience in face of shocks. There is a gap in the literature referring to the impact of ITI mechanism on enhancing resilience or sustainable development of an area. Even if the implementation process of the ITI mechanism is not finished, if the mechanism positively influences aspects such as employment, migration or economic growth, through its contribution to the socio-economic development of the area, it will also influence the territory's resilience in face of shocks. This aspect is particularly important considering that strengthening the territory's resilience will help communities to be prepared for future shocks and will decrease the negative impact of the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on the socio-economic development of Danube Delta territory.

Also, there are studies focused on the effectiveness of this particular instrument in different Member States that showed ITI's effectiveness as a tool of the cohesion policy. Most studies regarding the ITI mechanism implementation were conducted on ITI territories within Poland (Wyrwa, Barska and Jędrzejczak-Gas, 2017; Glinka, 2017; Kogut-Jaworska, 2019) and revealed that the mechanism contributed to the development of cities and urban functional areas because it identified the specific needs of these areas, it unlocked their potential, it offered integrated support that led to a more effective policy approach, it increased the cooperation between the local government units from the functional urban areas, built a multi-level management system and helped the mentioned areas, which had structural problems, to fulfill the objectives of the regional policy.

Integrated territorial approaches planned for the 2014–2020 period are often based on experiences from the previous programming periods. Nevertheless, the new approaches also contain new elements which have had a considerable impact on programming and governance structures, and will also affect the management and implementation of the ESI Funds. It is too early to comment with certainty on whether these approaches will also lead to new, and better, results.

3. Research methodology

3.1 The main objectives of the study and research questions

The present paper aims to analyze the process of implementation of the ITI mechanism within the ITI Danube Delta territory. The main purpose of the study is to analyze the impact of the implementation of this instrument and the main problems encountered by the responsible authorities for managing this programme and the beneficiaries of these funds, and its influence on developing this area's resilience.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the perception of the two categories of groups involved in this mechanism, namely: the beneficiaries (both private or public) and those responsible for managing the funding instruments (managing authorities, intermediate bodies, etc.), regarding the process of implementation of the ITI Danube Delta mechanism and its contribution to EU funds management;
2. To investigate the differences of perception between the fund managers and the beneficiaries regarding the main problems encountered in the implementation process and the impact of ITI mechanism; and
3. To investigate respondents' perceptions regarding the ITI mechanism's impact, especially on the resilience of ITI Danube Delta territory.

The study is based on four hypotheses:

- H1: Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the aspects improved by ITI funding mechanism implementation will be observed.
- H2: Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the contribution of ITI mechanism to the implementation of EU funds will be observed.
- H3: Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the main problems encountered in the implementation process will be observed.
- H4: Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the impact of ITI mechanism on resilience in ITI territory will be observed.

3.2 Research design and data collection

The research methodology consists of an opinion survey conducted using two questionnaires designed by the authors for each category of respondents: management authorities and beneficiaries, respecting the characteristics of each targeted group. The purpose was to create a comprehensive image regarding the implementation process of the ITI Danube Delta from both perspectives because the management authorities and the beneficiaries might have different opinions.

Regarding the questionnaires, the first one was addressed to the managers within the management authorities and comprised 15 questions. The first four questions

were addressed in order to reveal respondents' characteristics: the management authority in which they worked, the number of employees within the institution, the positions they held (management or execution), and their experience in the European programmes' implementation. The other 11 questions were designed to measure respondents' perceptions regarding the management of EU programmes, the difficulties in understanding the operational programmes' documentation, their opinion regarding the collaboration process between beneficiaries and authorities responsible for EU funds' management, problems encountered during the process of projects' implementation and the impact of the ITI Danube Delta mechanism.

The second questionnaire was designed for the beneficiaries of the projects implemented through the ITI Danube Delta mechanism, comprising 17 questions. The first five questions investigated respondents' characteristics such as the field of activity, the type of organization where they worked, the area where the organization was located – urban or rural, and the number of employees. The other 12 questions aimed to analyze beneficiaries' perception concerning the relation with the management authorities, the impact of the projects implemented on their organizations, the operational programmes to which they applied, the number of projects they participated in, the ITI Danube Delta mechanism, and its impact on socio-economic development.

The questionnaire was administered via e-mail between May and August 2020 to all institutions and organizations included in the sample.

Knowing the perception of the two categories of respondents regarding the impact of using the ITI mechanism is important because these are persons highly involved in the implementation of the submitted projects. Thus, the first category – fund managers – appreciates the impact of using this instrument in an overall picture. To be exact, they evaluate the impact on a large scale, taking into consideration each project at a time. Also, they can draw conclusions regarding the output given by the use of ITI, not focusing on individual projects and the needs fulfilled by their implementation.

The second category – the beneficiaries – appreciates the impact of using the ITI instrument taking into consideration their personal experiences within the projects they implement. These projects could be one per respondent or 10 per respondent.

The analysis of the specific indicators regarding the impact of ITI implementation in the territory is set to be conducted after we assess the differences in perception between the two categories of respondents. Therefore, indicators such as unemployment rate could be calculated for each territory, but the evolution of this particular indicator does not state the real impact given by the implementation of the submitted projects. So, whereas the evolution of unemployment might be on a descending trend, as a result of the implemented projects, this indicator can easily be influenced by the global pandemic. This is the reason why the perception of the two stakeholders is equally important.

4. The main findings of the study regarding ITI mechanism's implementation and its impact on the Danube Delta territory

4.1 The main characteristics of the sample

The two questionnaires were applied to the two categories of respondents, as follows: the fund managers and the beneficiaries. In the fund managers' case, the exhaustive sampling method was used, as the questionnaire was sent to all the organizations involved in the implementation of the ITI Danube Delta mechanism. Consequently, the fund managers were chosen from the following institutions: the Intercommunity Development Association (ADI) – ITI Danube Delta, the South-East Regional Development Agency, the eight Management Authorities for each Programme as part of ITI mechanism – the Managing Authority for Regional Operational Programme, the Managing Authority for National Rural Development Programme, the Managing Authority for Large Infrastructure Operational Programme, the Managing Authority for Human Capital Operational Programme, the Managing Authority for Competitiveness Operational Programme, the Managing Authority for Administrative Capacity Operational Programme, the Managing Authority for Fishing and Maritime Affairs Operational Programme, the Functional Working Group within the Ministry of European Funds, and to the seven Intermediate Bodies for each Programme. The questionnaire was sent to all the organizations included in the sample. Considering the number of employees that are working with the ITI mechanism, 3–4 responses were asked from each institution. The response rate was 100% as all the institutions accepted to participate in the study, and 42 responses were received.

The beneficiaries from ITI Danube Delta were selected through the convenience sampling method. It should be mentioned that the number of contracted projects is bigger than the number of beneficiaries because there are beneficiaries with more than one project. Consequently, the questionnaire was sent to all 38 local public administrations within the ITI Danube Delta territory, the public institutions within the territory, the two County Councils (Tulcea and Constanța) involved in the mechanism, and to 150 private firms. The private firms were selected randomly from all fields of activity (taking into consideration the pillars from the Strategy for ITI Danube Delta). From all the mentioned institutions and private firms, 71 persons agreed to participate in the study.

The 42 participants in the study from the fund managers' category came from all the organizations included in the sample. The distribution of respondents based on the institution in which they worked is the following: 50% of the respondents worked in a Managing Authority (from all the Programmes funding the ITI Danube Delta mechanism), 21.4% in the Intercommunity Development Association – ITI Danube Delta, 14.3% came from the Intermediate Bodies (from all the Programmes funding the ITI mechanism) and 14.3% worked in other types of organizations (e.g., the Functional Working Group within the Ministry of the European Funds, Local Action

Groups financed through the National Rural Development Programme or Fishing and Maritime Affairs Operational Programme).

Regarding respondents' distribution (within the fund managers group) by their level of power, 21.4% of them occupied management positions whereas the other 78.6% occupied execution positions within the institutions included in the sample.

Concerning the size of the organizations where the fund managers worked, the majority of respondents – 25 (60%) came from institutions with more than 100 employees, 15 (35%) worked in institutions with 10–50 employees, while 2 (5%) worked in organizations with 50–100 employees.

Regarding participants' distribution (within the fund managers group) by seniority in the institutions they worked in, it can be observed that the majority – 21 (50%) had more than 10 years of experience, 14 (33.3%) had between 5 and 10 years of experience and only 7 (16.7%) had between 1 and 5 years of experience.

As regards respondents' experience (within the fund managers group), measured by the number of projects analyzed in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 periods, in the previous programming period, 19% of respondents analyzed 1–10 projects, 33.30% analyzed 10–50 projects, and 26% analyzed more than 50 projects. In the current programming period, 31% of the respondents analyzed 1–10 projects, 14.3% analyzed 11–20 projects and 52.40% of the respondents analyzed more than 20 projects, revealing the fact that the study's participants were experienced in analyzing EU funding projects.

As mentioned before, the questionnaire was also sent to representatives of the beneficiaries of ITI Danube Delta and 71 persons agreed to participate in the study.

Regarding beneficiaries' distribution by their field of activity, most of them (30%) came from public administration, followed by tourism and ecotourism (12.7%), agriculture, forestry, fishing, and aquaculture (11.3%), and construction fields (7%). The rest of them submitted different answers, such as consultancy, recreational activities, service for ships and boats, auto service and research and development.

The majority (54.9%) worked in private firms, followed by the local public administration institutions (25.4%) and the rest of them worked in central public administration (2.8%), autonomous directions (2.8%), in institutions subordinated to the central or local public administration (8.4%), NGOs (4.3%) and cult units (1.4%).

Regarding the size of the organizations where the participants activated, the majority of respondents (58%) came from small organizations, with less than 10 employees (representing small enterprises), followed by organizations with more than 100 employees (27%) (representing the institutions from the public sector), 12% worked in organizations with 10–50 employees, and 3% came from organizations with 50–100 employees.

More than that, 71.8% of the respondents worked in organizations situated in urban areas, and 28.2% in organizations located in a rural area.

4.2 The fund managers' perception concerning the implementation of ITI mechanism in the Danube Delta territory

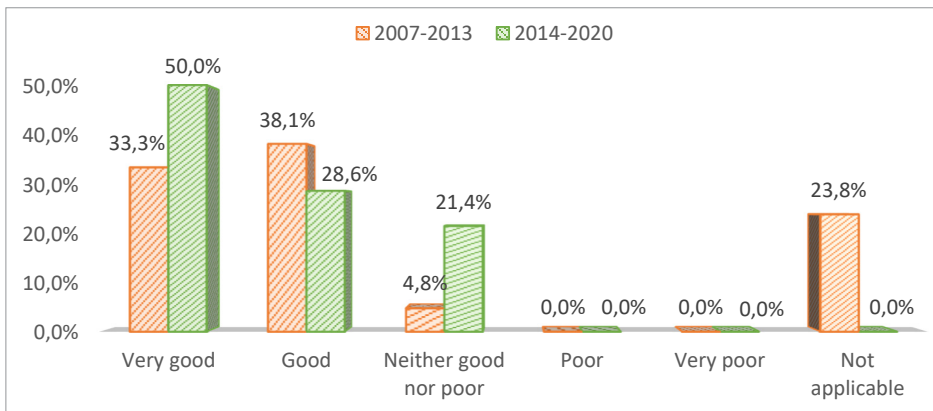


Figure 2: Fund managers' perception regarding the management of European funds' implementation in the two programming periods

Source: Authors (2021)

Figure 2 presents respondents' perception regarding the management of the European funds' implementation by the institutions where they activated in the previous programming period (2007–2013) and the current programming period (2014–2020). The answers revealed a positive perception concerning the process of managing the implementation of these funds for both programming periods. For the 2014–2020 period, the proportion of participants who had a good and very good perception regarding the management process of the European funds increased compared to the previous period (78.6% vs. 71.4%). None of the respondents had a poor or very poor perception. Also, the column illustrating the answer 'Not applicable' was an answer variant only for the 2007–2013 period. The registered answers are from the respondents who work in the Intercommunity Development Association (IDA) ITI Danube Delta or in the Functional Working Group ITI Danube Delta within the Ministry of European Funds, two structures that did not exist in the previous programming period.

Regarding the degree of difficulty concerning the understanding of the programming documents used in the 2014–2020 period, 26.2% of the fund managers found the programming documents difficult and very difficult to understand. However, the majority of the respondents — 57.1% — attributed them a medium degree of difficulty, while 16.7% considered them easy to understand. On the whole, the results have shown a positive perception regarding the degree of difficulty in understanding the programming documents, but the authorities should simplify these documents considering their importance in the implementation process.

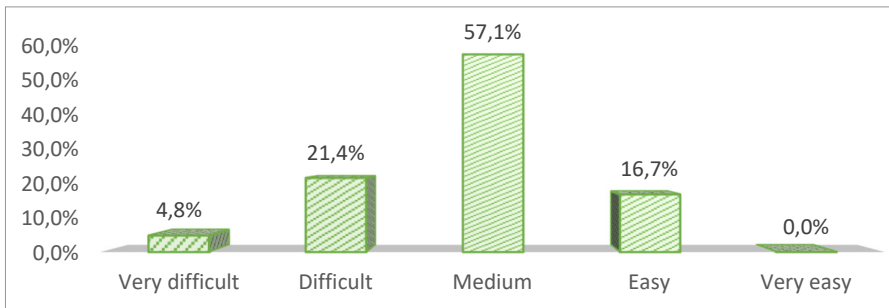


Figure 3: Perception on the degree of difficulty in understanding the programming documents in the 2014-2020 period

Source: Authors (2021)

Table 1: Importance of the problems encountered by managing authorities in the projects' implementation process

| Answer variants | Average |
|--|---------|
| Restricted levers of action for organizations closer to the beneficiaries | 3.52 |
| The guide's conditions are not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs | 3.83 |
| The public procurement process | 3.88 |
| The reimbursement process | 3.86 |
| Poor communication between institutions | 3.60 |
| Reporting mechanism and methods of documents' uploading on digital platforms | 3.55 |

Source: Authors (2021)

The degree of importance of the problems encountered by the management authorities in the projects' implementation process (see Table 1) was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 meant extremely important and 1 meant not very important. According to the results, the main problems were the public procurement process (3.88), the delays in the reimbursement process (3.86), and the guides' conditions that were not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs (3.83).

Table 2: Fund managers' satisfaction on collaboration between authorities and beneficiaries

| Answer variants | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Very satisfied | 19% |
| Satisfied | 52.4% |
| Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | 23.8% |
| Dissatisfied | 2.4% |
| Very dissatisfied | 2.4% |

Source: Authors (2021)

The present question intended to emphasize respondents' perception regarding the collaboration process between the authorities responsible for the European funds' management and the beneficiaries or the applicants in the 2014–2020 period. Given the fact that these authorities acted also as beneficiaries of the Technical Assistance Programme (for instance, IDA ITI Danube Delta is an authority responsible for the management of the European funds and also a beneficiary), their answer could be considered from both perspectives. As it can be observed, 71.4% of the respondents demonstrated a positive perception regarding the relationship between the authorities involved in the European funds' implementation and the beneficiaries, 23.8% of the respondents had a neutral opinion, and only 4.8% of them had a negative perception.

4.3 *The beneficiaries' perception concerning the implementation of ITI mechanism in Danube Delta territory*

Table 3: Beneficiaries' degree of satisfaction on financial opportunities in two programming periods: 2014–2020 and 2007–2013

| Answer variants | Percentage |
|------------------------|------------|
| To the smallest extent | 5.6% |
| To a small extent | 1.4% |
| To a medium extent | 21.1% |
| To a high extent | 18.3% |
| To the highest extent | 53.5% |

Source: Authors (2021)

The beneficiaries were asked if the existing financing programs addressed the organizations' financing needs. 71.8 % of the respondents considered that their needs were fulfilled by the existing financing opportunities to a high and the highest extent, whereas only 7% considered that their needs were fulfilled only to a small and the smallest extent.

Within the sample, a large majority of the respondents (94.4%) have applied for European Union funding in the 2014–2020 programming period, but only 59.2% of the respondents applied in the 2007–2013 programming period.

The respondents were asked about the financing programmes to which, either they or their organizations, applied in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods (see Table 4). Most of them applied to the Regional Operational Programme, followed by the Rural Development National Programme and the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme (2014–2020) or the Environment Operational Programme (2007–2013). Under the section 'Others', respondents answered the Fishing and Maritime Affairs Operational Programme, the Interreg EUROPE programme, the Romania-Ukraine 2014–2020 programme, ENI CBC Black Sea Basin, the Technical Assistance Operational Programme. In addition, it can be observed that the number

Table 4: European financing programs accessed by beneficiaries: comparison of the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods

| 2007-2013 | 2014-2020 | 2007–2013 | 2014–2020 |
|---|---|------------|-----------|
| Answer variants | | Percentage | |
| Rural Development National Programme | Rural Development National Programme | 18.3% | 28.2% |
| Regional Operational Programme | Regional Operational Programme | 32.4% | 49.3% |
| Transport Sectoral Operational Programme | Large Infrastructure Operational Programme | 1.4% | 23.9% |
| Environment Operational Programme | | 14.1% | 23.9% |
| | Human Capital Operational Programme | | 7.0% |
| Operational Programme Increasing Economic Competitiveness | Competitiveness Operational Programme | 8.5% | 1.4% |
| Administrative Capacity Operational Programme | Administrative Capacity Operational Programme | 5.6% | 14.1% |
| Others | Others | 11.3% | 14.1% |
| Not applicable | Not applicable | 7% | 26.8% |

Source: Authors (2021)

of applications to the Regional Operational Programme and the National Rural Development Programme increased compared to the previous period.

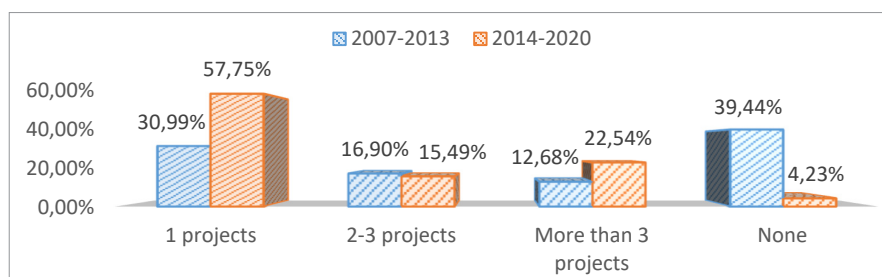


Figure 4: Respondents' experience (within beneficiaries' group) in project implementation

Source: Authors (2021)

Figure 4 presents respondents' experience in project implementation as members of the implementation teams in both programming periods. The results are slightly predictable because the number of representatives of SMEs in the sample is high and, in the previous programming period, SMEs were allowed to apply for only one project in most cases. It can be observed that the number of respondents who worked in one project or in more than three projects increased significantly in the 2014–2020 period and the proportion of the respondents who did not have experience in any projects decreased considerably. It can be assumed that the high proportion of respondents who did not participate in any project in 2007–2013 is caused by two reasons: either the financing opportunities did not meet their needs or they were new employees in their organizations.

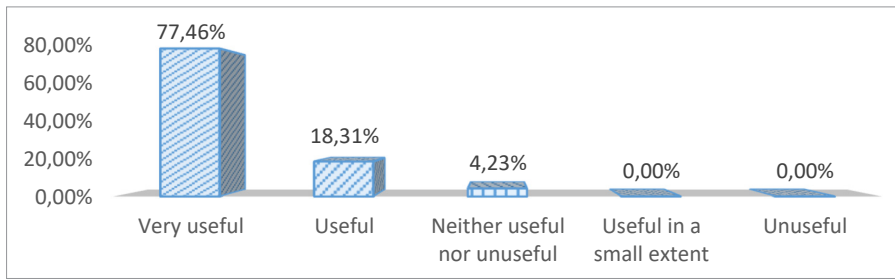


Figure 5: Beneficiaries' perception regarding ITI Danube Delta mechanism's impact on facilitating access to financing opportunities in the 2014-2020 period

Source: Authors (2021)

The majority of the respondents (77.5%) appreciated that the mechanism was very useful, considerably facilitating access to financing opportunities, revealing a very good perception regarding the ITI mechanism.

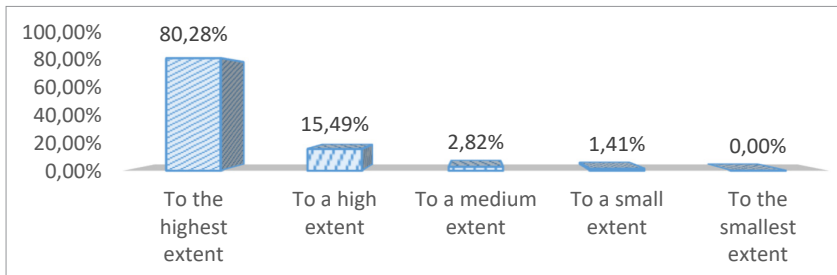


Figure 6: Beneficiaries' perception regarding IDA ITI Danube Delta's support

Source: Authors (2021)

More than that, the beneficiaries were asked if IDA ITI Danube Delta supported them throughout the entire process, namely applying to financing and implementing the projects. The majority (95.77%) appreciated that IDA ITI Danube Delta offered support for their organizations to a high and to the highest extent, and only 1.4% considered that the association supported them to the smallest extent, the results showing a high degree of appreciation concerning the activity of IDA ITI Danube Delta.

4.4 The comparative analysis between the managers' and the beneficiaries' perception regarding the main problems encountered in the implementation process and the impact of ITI Danube Delta mechanism on the socio-economic development of the territory

In order to investigate the impact of the projects implemented through the ITI mechanism, the respondents were presented eight areas, being asked to choose to what extent the projects implemented through the ITI Danube Delta mechanism had

an impact on the development of the mentioned areas, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1– meant to the smallest extent, 2– to a small extent, 3– to a medium extent, 4– to a high extent, and 5– representing that the ITI mechanism influenced the mentioned areas to the highest extent. The average distribution of responses is presented in a comparative manner to observe the differences in perception within the two groups.

Table 5: Distribution of the responses on the impact of projects implemented through the ITI Danube Delta mechanism

| Answer variants | Fund managers | Beneficiaries | Differences |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Combating migration (V7) | 2.46 | 2.9 | 0.44 |
| Reducing the effects caused by the demographic aging phenomenon (V8) | 2.52 | 2.9 | 0.38 |
| Employment (V9) | 3.00 | 3.9 | 0.90 |
| Economic growth (V10) | 3.57 | 4.1 | 0.53 |
| Supporting new sources of renewable energy (V11) | 2.90 | 3.5 | 0.60 |
| Developing circular economy (V12) | 3.31 | 3.5 | 0.19 |
| Developing physical and digital connectivity (V13) | 3.19 | 3.2 | 0.01 |
| Improving citizens' life quality (V14) | 3.62 | 4.0 | 0.38 |

Source: Authors (2021)

Table 5 shows the impact of the projects implemented through the ITI Danube Delta mechanism. The fund managers considered that the implemented projects influenced the most: the citizens' life quality (3.62), economic growth (3.57), development of the circular economy (3.31), and the development of physical and digital connectivity (3.19). The projects' implementation influenced the least migration (2.46) and the effects caused by the demographic aging phenomenon (2.52). On the whole, the fund managers considered that the implemented projects influenced the presented factors to a medium extent, the average of the answers being 3. The beneficiaries believed that the implemented projects influenced the most, from a medium to a high extent, economic growth (4.1), the citizens' life quality (4), and employment (3.9). The projects' implementation influenced at least the migration phenomenon (2.9) and the effects caused by the demographic aging phenomenon (2.9). On a whole, the respondents considered that the implemented projects influenced the presented factors from a medium to a high extent, the average of the answers being 3.5.

In order to test the first hypothesis of the study (Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perception regarding the aspects improved by ITI funding mechanism implementation will be observed), the Independent Sample T-Test was used. The T-Test showed that the first hypothesis was partially validated considering that the level of significance was lower than 0.05 only in three cases. Consequently, significant differences of perception between the two groups could be observed only regarding the ITI mechanism's impact on: employment; economic growth; and support on new sources of renewable energy. In all three cases the ben-

Table 6: The Independents Sample T Test's results

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---------|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| V7 | Equal variances assumed | 67.369 | .000 | -1.852 | 111 | .067 | -.51945 | .28042 | -1.07513 | .03623 |
| V8 | Equal variances assumed | 32.059 | .000 | -1.280 | 111 | .203 | -.34943 | .27301 | -.89043 | .19157 |
| V9 | Equal variances assumed | 6.759 | .011 | -3.950 | 111 | .000 | -.85915 | .21752 | -1.29018 | -.42813 |
| V10 | Equal variances assumed | .044 | .835 | -3.098 | 111 | .002 | -.55533 | .17928 | -.91058 | -.20008 |
| V11 | Equal variances assumed | 23.799 | .000 | -2.282 | 111 | .024 | -.57411 | .25154 | -1.07255 | -.07567 |
| V12 | Equal variances assumed | 29.341 | .000 | -.654 | 111 | .514 | -.16499 | .25209 | -.66452 | .33454 |
| V13 | Equal variances assumed | 52.401 | .000 | -.126 | 111 | .900 | -.03488 | .27584 | -.58146 | .51171 |
| V14 | Equal variances assumed | 2.370 | .126 | -1.869 | 111 | .064 | -.36687 | .19631 | -.75588 | .02214 |

Source: Authors (2021)

eficiaries appreciated that the mechanism had a higher impact on the development of these areas compared with the fund managers. They might have more subjective opinions or might perceive the impact based on their personal experiences with the citizens of the territory.

In order to find out the contribution of the implementation of ITI Danube Delta mechanism on the European funds' management, the participants were asked to choose from a scale from 1 to 5 to what extent some aspects have been improved after the implementation of the ITI Danube Delta mechanism, where the scale meant: 5– to the highest extent; 4– to a high extent; 3– to a medium extent; 2– to a small extent; and 1– to the smallest extent. The average distribution of the fund managers' answers reveals that the specific conditions from the applicants' guides (with an average of 4.3) and the available financial allocation (with an average of 4) were the aspects which improved the most, while the time of response to various requests represented the aspect which improved the least (with an average of 1.5). The beneficiaries con-

Table 7: Comparison of perceptions on the contribution of the implementation of ITI Danube Delta mechanism on the European funds' management

| Answer variants | Fund managers | Beneficiaries | Differences |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Specific conditions from the applicants' guides (V1) | 4.3 | 4.08 | -0.22 |
| Available financial allocation (V2) | 4 | 4.01 | 0.01 |
| Submitting the financing requests and reporting projects' progress (V3) | 2.8 | 2.85 | 0.05 |
| The support offered by the responsible structures for the European funds implementation (V4) | 2.4 | 2.59 | 0.19 |
| Time of response to various requests (V5) | 1.5 | 1.46 | -0.04 |

Source: Authors (2021)

sidered that the specific conditions from the applicants' guides (with an average of 4.1) and the available financial allocation (with an average of 4) were the aspects that improved the most, while the time of response to various requests represented the aspect which improved the least (with an average of 1.5).

Table 8: The Independent Sample T Test's results

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| V1 | Equal variances assumed | .505 | .479 | .986 | 111 | .326 | .24782 | .25138 | -2.5031 | .74595 |
| V2 | Equal variances assumed | .219 | .640 | -.329 | 111 | .743 | -.06170 | .18742 | -.43309 | .30968 |
| V3 | Equal variances assumed | .139 | .710 | -.071 | 111 | .944 | -.01174 | .16642 | -.34151 | .31804 |
| V4 | Equal variances assumed | 3.679 | .058 | -.571 | 111 | .569 | -.11536 | .20209 | -.51581 | .28510 |
| V5 | Equal variances assumed | .153 | .697 | .296 | 111 | .767 | .05902 | .19912 | -.33555 | .45359 |

Source: Authors (2021)

The Independent Sample T Test's result was also used to test the second hypothesis of the study (Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perception regarding the contribution of ITI mechanism to the implementation of EU Funds will be observed). The hypothesis did not validate considering that the level of significance was higher than 0.05 in all cases, which meant that there were

no significant differences, the perceptions of the two studied groups (fund managers and authorities) being very similar as well as the scores attributed to each mentioned aspect.

Table 9: Respondents' perception on importance of problems encountered in the projects' implementation process

| Answer variants | Fund managers | Beneficiaries | Differences |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Pre-financing process (V16) | 4.8 | 3.8 | 1 |
| The conditions within the guides that were not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs (V17) | 4.7 | 3 | 1.7 |
| The public procurement process (V18) | 4.6 | 3.3 | 0.7 |
| The reimbursement process (V19) | 3.2 | 2.4 | 0.8 |
| The reporting mechanism and the methods of uploading the documents on the digital platform (V20) | 2.6 | 1.8 | 0.8 |
| Poor communication with IDA ITI Danube Delta (V21) | 1.1 | | |

Source: Authors (2021)

The degree of importance of the problems encountered in the projects' implementation process (see Table 9) was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 meant 'extremely important' and 1 meant 'not very important'. For the managers, the main problems were the pre-financing process (4.8) and the guides' conditions that were not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs (4.7), while the poor communication with IDA ITI Danube Delta was considered the least important problem with an average of 1.1. According to the beneficiaries, the main problems were the pre-financing process (3.8) and the public procurement process (3), while the reporting mechanism and methods of uploading the documents on the digital platform was considered the least important problem with an average of 1.8. The opinions of the fund managers and beneficiaries were similar. However, the beneficiaries considered that the pre-financing process and the stated conditions within the guides that were not adapted to their needs as being of the same importance with a 3.8 average, while the fund managers considered the pre-financing process as being the main problem (4.8 average), followed by the conditions stated in the guide with a 4.7 average.

The T-Test was used to test the third hypothesis (Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perception regarding the main problems encountered in the implementation process will be observed), which was partially validated because the differences of perception were significant only regarding one problem – the reimbursement process.

In order to investigate the impact of ITI mechanism on resilience development in ITI territory, the participants were asked if the mechanism improved the Danube Delta territory's capacity to deal with economic, social, technological and environmental shocks, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant 'to the smallest extent' and 5

Table 10: The Independent Sample T Test's results

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| V16 Equal variances assumed | 2.375 | .126 | .603 | 111 | .548 | .168008 | .278817 | .384487 | .720504 |
| V17 Equal variances assumed | .173 | .678 | .193 | 111 | .847 | .03924 | .20283 | -.36269 | .44116 |
| V18 Equal variances assumed | 5.602 | .020 | 1.419 | 111 | .159 | .26157 | .18428 | -.10358 | .62672 |
| V19 Equal variances assumed | .845 | .360 | 6.054 | 111 | .000 | 1.18578 | .19586 | .79768 | 1.57388 |
| V20 Equal variances assumed | .284 | .595 | -.016 | 111 | .987 | -.00402 | .24716 | -.49378 | .48574 |

Source: Authors (2021)

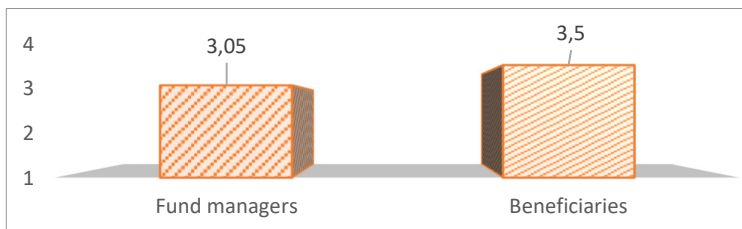


Figure 7: Respondents' perception regarding the impact of ITI mechanism on resilience development in ITI territory

Source: Authors (2021)

'to the highest extent'. Both groups of respondents considered that the mechanism improved the ITI territory's capacity to deal with shocks to a medium extent. The beneficiaries had a better perception than the fund managers concerning the impact of ITI mechanism on resilience development on the studied territory. This could be caused by the fact that the beneficiaries have better knowledge about the situations occurring within the territory and were confronted with problematic situations more than the responsible authorities.

Table 11: The Independent Sample T Test's results

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|------|------------------------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|--------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 37.561 | .000 | -1.808 | 111 | .073 | -.44534 | .24627 | -.93334 | .04266 |

Source: Authors (2021)

The last hypothesis of the study (Significant differences between the fund managers and the beneficiaries' perception regarding the impact of ITI mechanism on resilience development in ITI territory will be observed) did not validate, the perception of the two groups being similar.

5. The main conclusions of the study and discussions

The study revealed similar perceptions between the fund managers and the beneficiaries regarding the ITI mechanism's implementation, in most of the cases. The general conclusion of the survey is that the implementation of the ITI mechanism brought many benefits within the territory compared to the previous programming period. However, even if the benefits of this financing mechanism are obvious, both beneficiaries and fund managers encountered problems regarding access to funds, but also in the implementation process, such as the pre-financing process, the guides' conditions, that are not adapted to the beneficiaries' needs, and the public procurement process.

More than that, the study has shown that implemented projects influenced the development of certain areas such as citizens' life quality, economic growth, circular economy, physical and digital connectivity or employment, from a medium to a high extent. Also, the mechanism is perceived to influence, to a lower extent, aspects such as migration and the effects caused by the demographic aging phenomenon. However, a better perception of the beneficiaries regarding the ITI mechanism's impact on the socio-economic development of the area could be observed. Also, a positive perception was observed regarding the impact on the Danube Delta territory's capacity to deal with economic, social, technological and environmental shocks. The respondents, both beneficiaries and fund managers, considered that the ITI mechanism improved this capacity from a medium to a high extent, supporting the idea that this integrated approach positively influences the development of resilience within the Danube Delta territory.

The research also revealed that the ITI mechanism had a positive impact on the European funds' management, influencing aspects such as the specific conditions from the applicants' guides and the available financial allocation. In addition, the

respondents had a positive perception regarding ITI's impact on the Danube Delta territory's resilience, considering that the mechanism influenced this aspect to a medium extent.

On a whole, even if the implementation of the ITI mechanism is not finished yet, it can be affirmed that the implementation of this integrated approach had a positive impact on the development of ITI Danube Delta territory, contributing to the socio-development of the area and helping at improving the management of the European funds. The analysis showed a positive perception of both beneficiaries and fund managers, and a good collaborative relation between the authorities responsible with the funds' implementation and those benefiting from this financial opportunity.

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