

IMPACT OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION FINANCED UNDER SOP HRD 2007-2013 ON DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL SECTOR IN SOUTH MUNTENIA REGION

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Abstract

Under the current conditions, in which the Romanian economy still faces serious structural problems, corroborated with the global economic crisis, it is absolutely natural to consider as extremely important the financial support granted by the European Union to Romania as a safe source of financing and necessary for the development of the Romanian state as a whole in order to recover significant differences from other European states. The research starts from the premise that there is a correlation between the degree of maturity of the project management in the Romanian society, in general, within South Muntenia Development Region in particular, and the results obtained in attracting and implementing the European funds. We presented the objectives and the results obtained following the implementation of the projects in the education sector through SOP HRD 2007-2013 in South Muntenia Region, the impact on the beneficiaries of the financed projects in order to identify good practices and to formulate proposals that contribute to the improvement of the project management, respectively to the improvement of the impact of projects on the performance of organizations implementing them and on the effectiveness of the development and implementation of the regional strategies and policies. For the programming period 2007-2013, 195 open calls for proposals were launched, out of which 43 open calls for proposals effectively covered the education sector. The total financial amount allocated was 7,020,363,692.85 lei approximately 1,651,850,280.67 euros. It also presents an analysis of the questionnaire applied in the research and conclusions on the impact of the funding obtained by the educational sector.

Key words: quality, education, European funds, impact, SOPHRD

INTRODUCTION

Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOPHRD) established the major intervention axes for Romania in the human resources sector, axes co-financed under the European Social Fund under the objective Convergence, for the programming period 2007 - 2013. SOPHRD had 7 Priority axes and 21 major fields of intervention (MFI). In the education sector, projects under the major fields of interventions 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 2.1 and 2.2 were accessed [11].

MFI 1.1. Access to education and initial high quality vocational training [3] addressed to the need to develop and structure a pre-university education system to provide and ensure high quality education, professional skills and key competences for everybody.

MFI 1.2. High quality in higher education

[3] supported the activities destined to restructured the higher education in order to develop and implement national systems of qualifications and to ensure the quality in the higher education, destined to improve the learning opportunities, at the level of the bachelor and master cycles of study.

MFI 1.3. Human resources development in education and vocational training

[3] supported the training and development of the teaching staff skills in the education system and initial and continual vocational training sector, especially as regards the ability to use interactive teaching methods and TIC.

MFI 1.5. Doctoral and post-doctoral programmes to support the research

[3] – under which scholarships were granted, thus ensuring the conditions to participate in the doctoral and post-doctoral programmes in

Romania, as well as study practices/research/academic mobility of maximum 8 months in an university/research center of the European Union.

MFI 2.1 Transition from school to active life [3] supported the development of labor skills of the persons under the situation of transition from school to active life and consequently, the improvement of their insertion on the labor market. **MFI 2.2. Prevention and correction of early school leaving** [3] supported the elaboration and implementation of strategies, action plans and measures, at local and multi-regional level, to: prevent the phenomenon of early school leaving and maintain in the education sector and initial vocational training the persons under risk; a re-integration in education of the persons who abandoned/left school early.

SOPHRD 2007-2013 was managed by the Managing Authority SOPHRD 2007-2013 organized within the Ministry of Labor. For the specific fields of education two intermediate bodies were designated within the Ministry of Education, respectively IB SOPHRD – MNE (DMI 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.2) and IB SOPHRD – national center for development of education and vocational training CNDIPT (MFI 2.1 and 2.3) [4].

For the programming period 2007-2013 195 application forms were launched, of which 43 application forms aimed effectively the education sector. The total financial amount allocated was 7,020,363,692.85 lei, about 1,651,850,280.67 euro.[9]

Under these application forms, two types of projects were launched [5]: Strategic projects – implemented at national, multi-regional and sectoral level, with a value contained between 500,000 – 5,000,000 euro; **Grant projects** – implemented at regional, multi-regional or local level, with a value contained between 50,000 – 499,999 euro. For the projects managed by IB SOPHRD within the Ministry of Education the financial allocation was defined only at national level, not at regional level. Under this paper, we will present the projects implemented in the education sector, in South Muntenia region, for the programming period 2007-2013. Following

submitting the application forms in South Muntenia, projects were submitted in the education sector in total amount of 421,641,401.18 lei (about 99,209,741.45 euro) [10] namely about 6% of the total financial allocation related to all application forms launched under SOPHRD 2007-2013.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As research methods, we used documenting, the analysis and data processing from a secondary analysis. These methods are based on the synthesis processes, induction and deduction, analogy and comparative analysis. Once the information was defined, known and interpreted, the next step was the detailed documenting of the interest sector. In the analysis activity, the study of the documentation available for the sector or for the analysed system is a starting point.

The documenting, the analysis and the data processing and the information obtained from the following sources: scientific papers in the sector, annual progress report on SOPHRD implementation, official websites of the Ministry of Labor and intermediate bodies, information taken from the specialized websites on European programmes implementation, Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, Framework Document for the implementation of SOPHRD 2007-2013.

In order to analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of using the European funds allocated through SOPHRD 2007-2013 in the sector of pre-university and university education, we developed a questionnaire with 5 open questions and grid type.

The questionnaire was sent electronically to the 60 beneficiaries of projects financed in the education sector in South Muntenia region.

By applying the questionnaire we aimed to identify the impact of the projects on the direct beneficiaries (for which we asked for a brief description of the impact of the projects as can be perceived daily, as well as for expressing the satisfaction ticking marks), good practices/successful stories which we requested to provide an example of a "successful story") as

well as the main difficulties encountered in the project implementation (for which we asked for a brief description of them and identify the main difficulties by ticking pre-defined items). 42 questionnaires received from the beneficiaries were analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

South-Muntenia Region has as a managing structure and implementation of the regional development policies, South-Muntenia Regional Development Agency (South-Muntenia RDA), which started operating in 1999 and it has the headquarter in Călărași municipality. In the other 6 counties, the Agency is represented by a County Office. The education system, both at national level and at the level of South-Muntenia Region, includes the education infrastructure, represented by the buildings in which the education activity takes place, namely kindergartens, schools, high schools, faculties and places for vocational education and special education. It can be said that the school infrastructure is well represented at the level of the region and thus it is possible to support the good development of the educational act, with the mention that in the rural area, this type of social infrastructure can be considered inadequate to the rural development process, requiring a restructuring of the school structures and investment projects related to the local requirements and needs [2].

The share of schools in the region is as follows: 0.15% for primary education and 99.85% for secondary school compared to the national level, where the share was 1.29% and respectively 98.71%. Prahova County has the largest number of kindergartens - 41 units, most secondary schools - 137 schools, as well as the most high schools throughout the region, 54 high schools and 6 post-high schools in 2015. Arges County has, however, the highest number of faculties, respectively 2 higher education units. [2].

Under SOPHRD 2007-2013 in the sector of pre-university education 51 projects were implemented, with a total value of

348,104,865.19 lei (about 81,907,027.10 euro) [12].

For the pre-university sector projects were financed in the education sector under MFI 1.1 Access to education and initial quality vocational training, 1.3 – Human resources development in education and vocational training, 2.1 – Transition from school to active life, 2.2 – Prevention and correction of early school leaving (Figure 1.)

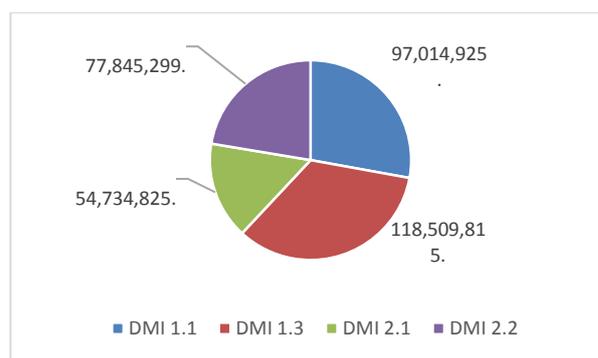


Fig. 1. Projects implemented on fields of intervention specific to pre-university education - LEI
Source: Ministry of European Funds

Within **the main field of intervention 1.1 - Access to education and initial quality vocational training**, 9 projects were implemented, with total value of 97,014,925.60 lei (about 22,827,041.32 euros), of which a grant project and 8 strategic projects in Călărași, Prahova, Dâmbovița, Teleorman counties (Figure 2.) [12].

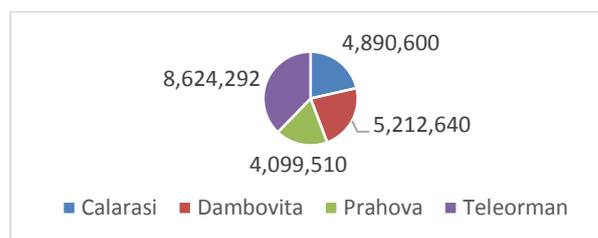


Fig. 2. Sums attracted under MFI 1.1 in South Muntenia region - LEI
Source: Ministry of European Funds

Projects were not implemented in Argeș, Giurgiu and Ialomița counties. Following the projects implementation financed under SOPHRD 2007-2013, under MFI 1.1, 36.827 persons benefited, and the distribution on target group categories is shown below (Fig. 3).

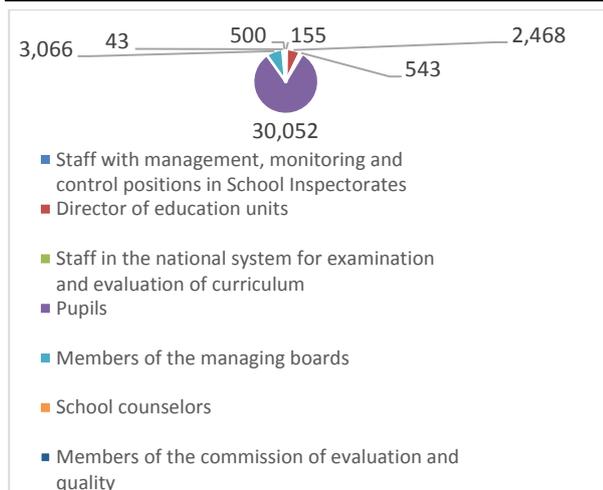


Fig. 3. Target group categories involved in the projects implementation – MFI 1.1- no. persons
Source: Own calculation.

Within **the major field of intervention 1.3 - Human Resources Development in Education and Training**, 15 projects were implemented, with total value of 118,509,815.00 lei (about 27,884,662.35 euro), out of which 6 grant projects and 9 strategic projects.

Within **MFI 1.3** no projects were implemented in Călărași, Ialomița, Giurgiu, counties and for the counties where the projects were implemented, the distribution according to the attracted amounts is shown in the following figure (Fig. 4).

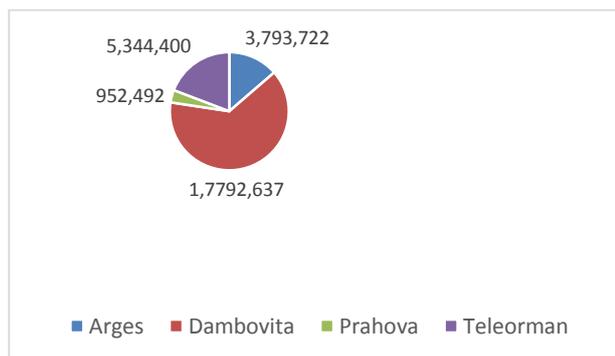


Fig. 4. Sums attracted following the project implementation under MFI 1.3- LEI
Source: Ministry of European Funds

Following the implementation of the projects financed under SOPHRD 2007-2013, within MFI 1.3, 23,157 persons benefited, and the distribution on target group categories is shown below (Fig. 5.)



Fig. 5. Target group categories involved in the project implementation – MFI 1.3 – no. persons
Source: Own calculation.

Within **the main field of intervention 2.1 - Transition from school to active life**, 15 projects were implemented, total value of 54,734,825.25 lei (about 12,878,783.00 euro), out of which 12 grant projects and 3 projects strategic projects.

Within MFI 2.1 no projects were implemented in Giurgiu county, and the allocation of attracted amounts, by counties, is shown below (Fig. 6.)

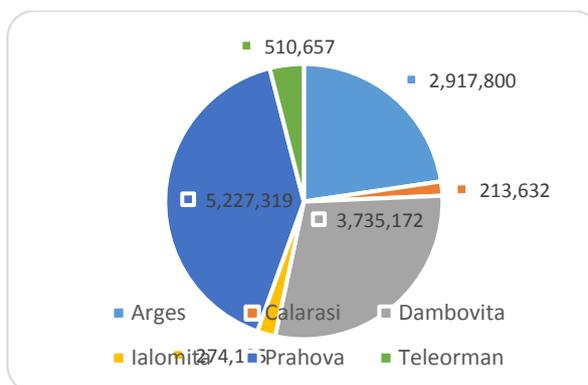


Fig. 6. Sums attracted under MFI 2.1 in South Muntenia region - LEI
Source: Ministry of European Funds

Following the implementation of the projects financed through SOPHRD 2007-2013, 10,274 people benefited under MFI 2.1 and the distribution by target group categories is shown below (Fig. 7.) [12].

Within **the major field of intervention 2.2 – Prevention and correction of early school leaving**, 12 projects were implemented, total

value of 77,845,299.34 lei (about 18,316,540.00 euro), of which 4 grant projects and 8 strategic projects.

Briefly, within MFI 2.2 projects were not implemented in Călărași county, and the distribution of the sums on counties is shown below (Fig. 8.).

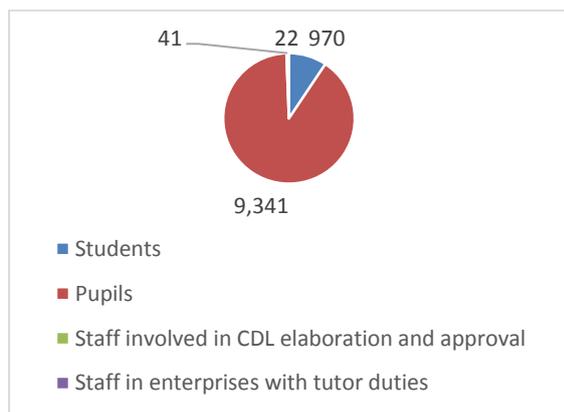


Fig. 7. Categories by target group involved in the project implementation – MFI 2.1 – no. persons
 Source: Own calculation.

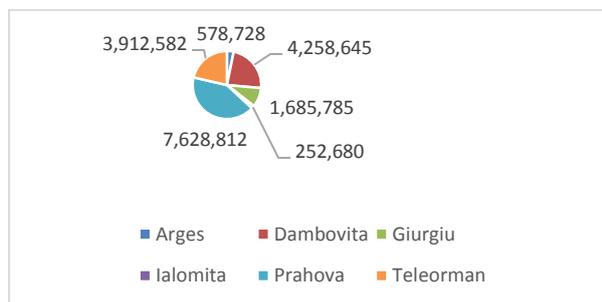


Fig. 8. Sums attracted under MFI 2.2 in South Muntenia region– LEI
 Source: Ministry of European Funds

Following the projects implementation financed under SOPHRD 2007-2013, under MFI 2.2, 13,275 persons benefited, and the distribution on target group categories is the following (Fig. 9.) [11].

In conclusion, in the pre-university education sector, projects were implemented in all counties in South Muntenia region, and 83,633 persons benefited from the activities implemented under these projects [12].

Under SOPHRD 2007-2013 in the university education sector, 9 projects were implemented, with a total value of 73,536,535.99 lei (about 17,302,715.00 euro) [12].

For the university education, projects were financed under the major field of intervention

1.2 - *Quality in higher education and within MFI 1.5 Doctoral and post-doctoral programmes in support of research* (Figure 10).

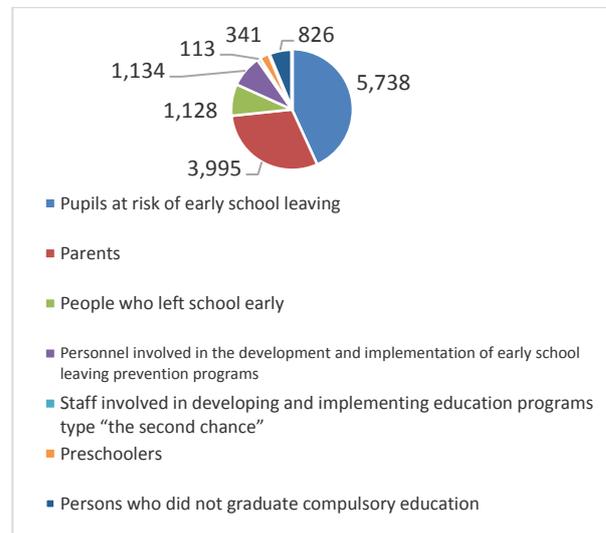


Fig. 9. Categories of target group involved in the project implementation – MFI 2.2- no. persons
 Source: Own calculation.

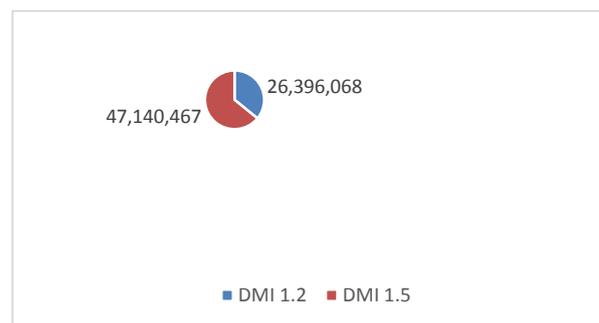


Fig. 10. Projects implemented on major fields of intervention specific to university education - LEI
 Source: Ministry of European Funds

Within the major field of intervention **1.2 – Quality in higher education**, 4 strategic projects were implemented, with a total value of 26,396,068.04 lei (about 6,210,840.00 euro), and the distribution of the sums attracted, on universities, are shown below (Fig. 11.) [9, 8].

Following the implementation of the projects financed under SOPHRD 2007-2013, under MFI 1.2, 1,949 persons benefited, and the distribution on target group categories is shown below: students, staff involved in elaborating university programs, representatives of social partners in education.[1].

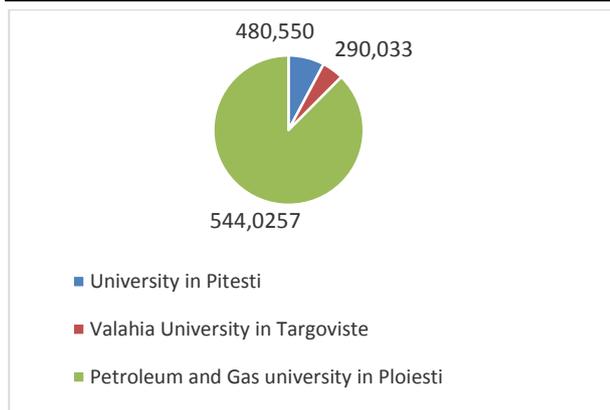


Fig. 11. Sums attracted under MFI 1.2 in South Muntenia region - LEI

Source: Ministry of European Funds

Within the major field of intervention 1.5 - **Doctoral and post-doctoral programs in support of research**, 5 strategic projects were implemented, with total value of 47,140,467.95 (about 11,091,875.00 Euro) and the distribution of attracted funds to the beneficiary universities, is shown below: Valahia University in Targoviste and Petroleum and Gas University in Ploiesti. Following the implementation of the projects financed by SOPHRD 2007-2013, 306 PhD students benefited from MFI 1.5. In conclusion, in the university education sector, projects were implemented in all three university centers in South Muntenia region, and from the activities implemented within these projects benefited 2,255 persons. In order to analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of using the European funds allocated through SOPHRD 2007-2013, in the pre-university and university sector, 42 questionnaires were analyzed from the beneficiaries who wanted to collaborate in our research. Regarding **the impact of project results on beneficiaries**, the respondents generally described that the project activities had a direct impact on the target group members.

The project beneficiaries in the pre-university education sector appreciated that an important role was given to provide financial and material support to target group members, mainly formed of pupils or persons who abandoned school, in the sense that they could continue/resume studies to increase the employment opportunities in the labor market

[2]. Following their participation in the project activities, the members of the target group had the opportunity to participate in various experience sharing in the country and even abroad, an activity that would not have been possible without the support of the project, given that the members of the target group in the pre-university sector belong to the disadvantaged communities.

On the other hand, the teachers involved as a target group in the analyzed projects have positively appreciated their involvement in the project through the fact that they have benefited from specific training courses that helped them in acquiring new skills in specific working techniques with the target group members from disadvantaged communities at risk of leaving school or with persons who have already left the education system [6].

The overall objective of SOPHRD 2007-2013 was: *“to develop human capital and increase competitiveness by linking education and lifelong learning to the labor market and providing increased opportunities for future participation in a modern, flexible and inclusive labor market of 1.650. 000 persons”*[7].

The project beneficiaries of the university education, respectively the students appreciated positively the role of the projects in the scientific training, especially by granting scholarships to increase their participation in scientific research activities, at national and international symposia, through participation in research internships in the country and abroad, activities that could not have been achieved without the logistic and material support provided within the project. The academic staff involved in the project implementation as a target group have improved their skills, developed new curricula adapted to the labor market, participated in various symposia and scientific events, benefited from experience sharing at national and transnational level.

Regarding how respondents appreciated **the impact of project results related to the needs initially identified for the target group**, the situation is presented in Fig.12.

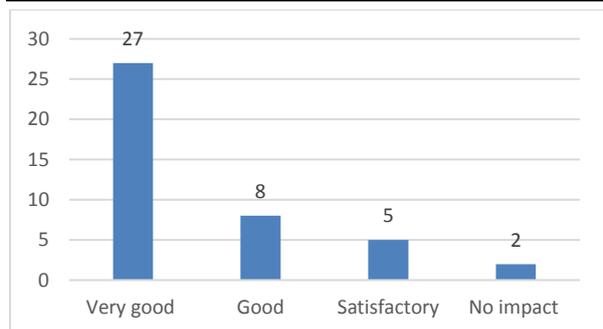


Fig. 12. Impact of project results related to the initial needs of the target group – no respondents
Source: Own calculation.

Referring to the examples of **good practices / “successful stories”** identified in the projects implemented by the respondents, we present in brief a few examples described in the questionnaire: elaborating and distributing a *Good Practice Guide based on case studies in kindergartens on children from Italy, Sweden, Spain and Romania*, which presents a comparative analysis of pre-school education models from the four countries; Annual fundraising campaigns (such as *Christmas Tree Festival*), organizing charity shows to provide material and logistic support to encourage children to participate / return to the education system; Implementation of the *training program - from need to efficiency* that was elaborated starting from an individual analysis of the training needs, the elaboration by each individual student of a personalized professional development plan, the development of training activities focusing on the actual practice and on concrete case studies; Application of **“blended-learning”** system by using electronic platforms, through which there is the possibility of a permanent, contact trainer-formable, but formable-formable, so that each formable/trained can regulate its own continuous learning activity in a constructive sense and benefit from the best practices of the colleagues; **Attending AGROTEHNICA 2015 Farming Equipment Fair in Hanover, Germany** - through which the participating students extended their horizons and improved their skills, benefited from a complex experience exchange where they had the opportunity to watch / test different technologies.

Regarding **the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the projects**, the respondents mentioned aspects such as frequent legislative changes, problems in ensuring the financial flow, large delays in reimbursement of the amounts already spent from the beneficiary institutions own funds, lack of communication/counseling from the contracting authority, difficulties to attract and maintain the target group in the pre-university education system (especially in the case of the Roma population).

The classification of **the major difficulties identified by the beneficiaries in the project implementation**, according to the respondents' options, is presented in Fig.13.

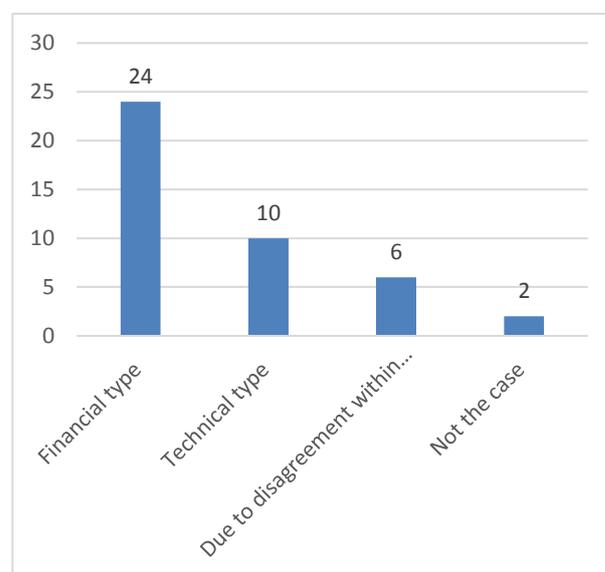


Fig. 13. Major difficulties identified in the project implementation –no of respondents
Source: Own calculation.

CONCLUSIONS

Under the projects implemented in South Muntenia region, in the education sector, financed under SOPHRD 2007-2013, a total number of 85,888 persons were supported (about 5% from the target group under the programme).

In order to bring long-term benefits, projects must take into account the context in which they are implemented, respond to the development needs of organizations implementing them and, last but not least, to solve problems. Every project that has benefited from an European grant has to

contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the programme, but also to the achievement of the objectives set by the European policies. Concerning the amounts contracted within the projects financed by SOPHRD 2007-2013 in the education sector, we notice that most funds were attracted in Dâmbovița, Prahova and Teleorman counties, in contrast the least funds were attracted in Ialomița, Giurgiu and Călărași counties, although the number of the disadvantaged communities is high and the school abandon is above the national average. The low rate of attraction of non-reimbursable foreign funds in the three counties can be caused by local stakeholders' lack of interest in implementing the projects, lack of literacy and implementation skills in the education sector, lack of human and financial resources needed to start and successfully implement a project etc.

The results of the research presented in this paper can be considered as support for improving the management of the European funded projects. Another *potential impact* of the research results is the awareness of the project managers about the importance of evaluating and monitoring the impact of the projects and the benefits it offers.

In conclusion, European funds must be seen as an important financing source that can lead to the modernization of Romania, and project management as the instrument that can make this progress possible.

An important role in this process is the ability of the state to efficiently channel funds to users and to appropriate investments for the desired economic growth. These European funds at present can bring an important contribution to Romania economic growth strategy. In this uncertain economic context, the projects financed by the European funds represent an important engine for economic growth.

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