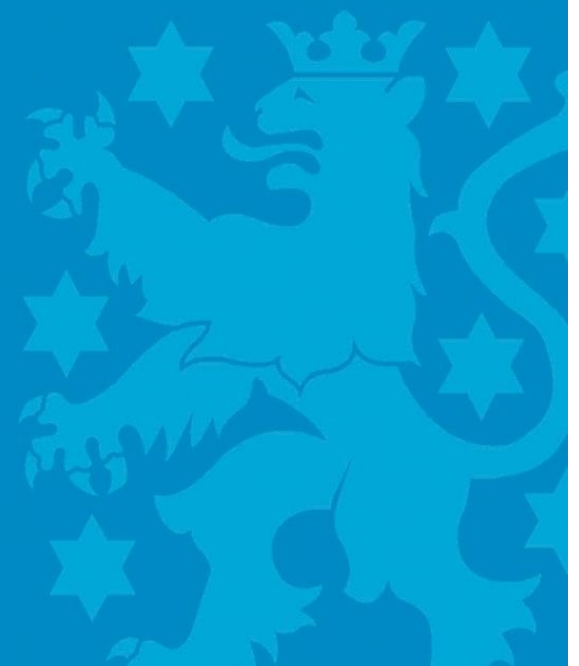




Evaluation of the Priority Axis 4 “Risk management and prevention, environmental protection and promotion of the sustainable use of resources” of the Operational Programme Thuringia ERDF 2014 – 2020

Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

This report documents the findings of the implementation and impact evaluation of the Priority Axis 4 "Risk management and prevention, environmental protection and promotion of the sustainable use of resources" of the Operational Programme Thuringia ERDF 2014 – 2020.

Priority Axis 4 of the Operational Programme Thuringia ERDF 2014 – 2020

The Priority Axis 4 (PA 4) contains two investment priorities, each with a specific objective (SO 11 and SO 12). SO 11 concerns the "Improvement of flood protection - risk prevention in Thuringia" (HWS) and includes measures for flood prevention, such as water retention in the area, in flood plains and flood retention basins, as well as technical flood protection in municipalities and cities. SO 12 addresses the "Restoration of near-to-nature ecosystems with a focus on waterways (Fließgewässer) and river basins" and includes measures for the development of waterways (FGE) and for the development of nature and landscape (ENL), e.g. in the form of improvements to passability, renaturation or the connection of habitats.

Focus of the evaluation

The analysis and evaluation of PA 4 and the two specific objectives 11 and 12 is based on the following central questions:

- SO 11 "Improvement of flood protection - risk prevention in Thuringia"
 - To what extent was protection against floods improved?
 - Which negative impacts were avoided?
- SO 12 "Restoration of near-to-nature ecosystems with a focus on waterways (Fließgewässer) and river basins"
 - To what extent do the measures contribute to the improvement of Thuringian waters?
 - To what extent do the measures contribute to the improvement of near-to-nature ecosystems in the vicinity of waterways and cities?
- Cross-cutting objective "sustainable development" and synergetic effects
 - Can further positive effects on climate protection goods be observed as a result of the measures?
 - To what extent do synergy effects exist between the individual measures?
 - Are there any further synergy effects and can systemic effects be identified?

Evaluation Design

To answer the central questions, an evaluation approach was chosen that focuses on the effectiveness of the measures implemented in the Priority Axis and under the Specific Objectives. In order to adequately contextualise the findings, the underlying implementation structures and processes were also examined.

Therefore, on the one hand, a differentiated evaluation of the implementation and achievement of the objectives is carried out, and on the other hand, a theory-based impact analysis

is conducted. For this purpose, intervention logics are developed, which later form the evaluation benchmark. Furthermore, an evaluation of monitoring data, a literature and document analysis as well as interviews with experts and case studies are carried out.

Key findings of the implementation and target achievement analysis

The analysis of the implementation and achievement of the objectives of PA 4 funding show a positive picture. Material and financial implementation and target achievement are already well advanced.

The target figures based on the output and result indicators will probably be achieved to a large extent by the end of the 2014 – 2020 funding period. The significant progress with regard to the projects' indicator target values and the contributions already made to the indicator goals in SO 11 and SO 12 show that it is mostly plausible to expect the relevant targets to be achieved. In the area of HWS, the achievement of the indicator target values can be expected to a high degree. In the area of FGE, the achievement of some indicator targets by the end of the funding period is still associated with some uncertainties. With the successful completion of the ENL projects, it can be assumed that all relevant indicator target values will be fully achieved (see chapter 4.1.1).

The successful material and financial implementation and the achievement of objectives are largely due to the extensive outreach to the target group that makes use of the funding. There is a generally high level of awareness of the funding and thus an extensive target group outreach. In addition, the Thüringer Landesamt für Umwelt, Bergbau und Naturschutz (TLUBN) and the Thüringer Landesgesellschaft (ThLG) are the only funding recipients for funding areas that concern hydraulic engineering by the state - and thus first-order water bodies - so that 100 percent of the target group is reached.

The achievement of the target group and the use of the funding are influenced by various factors. Influencing factors external to the programme that positively influence the uptake and thus the level of implementation and target achievement of the funding relate to framework conditions such as the increase in extreme weather events, the increasing awareness of politics and society for the concerns of SO 11 and SO 12, a general increase in construction prices, increasing land pressure (in municipalities), but also the need to implement regulatory requirements and to counteract the increasing species extinction (see chapter 4.1.3.1). Furthermore, it should be noted that PA 4 funding largely addresses existing funding gaps and complements other fundings very well (see chapter 4.1.3.2). The programme's internal influencing factors include the attractive funding conditions as well as the established structures and processes of administrative implementation and control. The processes are characterised by clearly defined areas of responsibility, well-rehearsed cooperation and the successful transfer of knowledge between the administrative offices involved. Furthermore, the Thüringer Aufbaubank (TAB), as a solution-oriented granting authority, makes a valuable contribution to the funding and also supports the networking of actors and projects among themselves. In addition, the agencies involved in the programme are striving to continuously implement improvement measures and to make the processing of the funding increasingly digital (see chapter 4.1.3.3). At the project implementation level, the evalu-

ation also identified various influencing factors that contribute to the successful implementation and achievement of the objectives of the PA 4 funding. These include successful cooperation with qualified and reliable contractors, the early and comprehensive involvement of "affected parties" and the provision of the necessary land (see chapter 4.1.4).

Overall, only gradual proposals for the further development and targeted optimisation of the PA 4 funding in the coming funding period can be derived from the analysis of the implementation and achievement of objectives as well as the influencing factors.

Findings of the impact analysis

The impact analysis also shows a positive picture with regard to the results and impacts of the funding in PA 4 that are either already apparent or can be expected in the future. The analyses of the projects that have been completed or are still being implemented already show that the funding can improve flood protection and that ecosystems are increasingly being restored to near-to-nature conditions. This applies to both the ecological development of the surface water bodies (FGE) and the surrounding areas (ENL). The funding of flood protection measures will result in

- New and further developed flood protection concepts, planning and other preliminary conceptual work,
- expanded and new flood protection elements,
- retention areas created and reclaimed,
- a delay in water runoff and the minimisation of material inputs,
- restored typical floodplain elements, and
- better flood protection for the population.

With regard to measures for the restoration of near-to-nature ecosystems with a focus on waterways and river areas, the funding results in

- new and further developed concepts, plans and other preliminary conceptual work,
- improved coordination of individual measures and better planning bases,
- waterway sections with improved ecological status,
- improved waterway passability, structure and water balance,
- habitat areas with improved conservation status,
- an expanded green infrastructure and recreational areas close to the city,
- improved species protection and an improvement in the population of valuable species, and
- restored near-to-nature ecosystems (in the urban environment).

As a result of these achieved outcomes, further effects or impacts deriving from the funding can be identified. Impacts that have not been apparent so far can nevertheless be plausibly expected due to their delayed occurrence.

For PA 4, such impacts relate to the following in various ways

- a reduction in the potential for flood damage and the associated risk prevention and protection of the population,
- in part, an increase in the quality of waterways with regard to hydromorphology,
- partial avoidance of value-added losses and partial impetus for tourism development and urban upgrading processes,
- enhancement of the natural environment and thus the preservation and restoration of natural habitats, the preservation, protection and improvement of the quality of the environment, and in some cases networks of habitats and areas of high nature conservation value.
- saving or increasing biological diversity.

In addition, it can be stated that a positive contribution is also made to raising awareness and environmental education among the population.

Overall, there are numerous interactions between these impacts, which vary depending on the project and the specific objective. In many places, projects contribute equally to SO 11 and SO 12.

Furthermore, the cross-cutting objective "sustainable development" is taken into account by PA 4 in various contexts - as a funding objective, in the funding policy objective and as a horizontal principle.

Proposals for further development and targeted optimisation for the next funding period 2021 – 2027

All in all, the evaluation has led only to some minor proposals as to how the funding in PA 4 could be designed in an even more targeted manner in the coming funding period 2021 – 2027. These proposals concern four levels:

- Approaches at the steering level
 - Consideration should be given to reducing the number of detailed output and result indicators in favour of fewer overarching indicators.
 - Continuously explore new opportunities to support beneficiaries in the provision or acquisition of the necessary land.
 - Following the example of the ENL "nature loan", the introduction of a pre-financing option for those projects on 2nd order water bodies that will not receive full financing in the future could be examined.
 - Consideration could be given to recognising measures to raise public awareness of environmental and nature conservation as eligible costs.
 - Formal requirements could be formulated for (public) participation or for the involvement of "affected parties" in the context of project implementation.
 - For ENL projects in particular, the simplified cost option could be applied even more frequently wherever possible.
 - The cross-cutting objective of sustainable development should also be established as a project selection criterion for ENL projects.

- The cross-cutting objective of sustainable development could be aligned more closely with the dimensions of the current Common Provisions Regulation on the European structural and investment funds or with EU regulation 2020/852 in the future.
- Proposals at the administrative level
 - Minor adjustments should be made to the TAB online portal to make it even more manageable and to align it with a fully digital processing of the funding.
 - Wherever possible, a proper handover should be ensured in the event of staff changes in all involved organisations.
- Proposals for communication and public relations
 - Through increased communication, the transparency of approval decisions especially for ENL projects could be further improved in the future.
 - In future, funding recipients could be informed more about networking opportunities and programmes that complement PA 4.
- Suggestions for raising awareness among beneficiaries
 - In order to better exploit synergy and networking potentials between SZ 11 and SZ 12, the good practice examples already published could be communicated even more.
 - In order to reduce obstacles to project implementation, third parties or "affected parties" should be involved at an early stage. In this regard, funding recipients could be increasingly trained and sensitised.

Overall evaluation of the funding in the PA 4

All in all, the evaluation of PA 4 shows a positive picture. With few exceptions, the implementation and achievement of objectives concerning the financial status and the defined indicators are progressing successfully and the majority of funds are committed. Numerous contextual factors have a positive effect on the utilisation of the funding, which complements other programmes in a suitable manner. The administrative structures and processes for implementing the funding have been successfully and purposefully designed and show only minor points for further improvements. An extensive target group outreach results in the successful implementation of projects. This makes it possible to achieve the results and impacts intended by the programme as far as possible, to create additional synergies and to contribute to the cross-cutting objective of sustainable development.