

## **MID-TERM EVALUATION**

OF THE EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
FUND, THE COHESION FUND AND  
THE JUST TRANSITION FUND



**2021  
2027**

**POLICY OBJECTIVE 1  
SMARTER EUROPE**



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy  
Directorate B — Policy  
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Annex 6.5  
Fiche Policy Objective 1  
“Smarter Europe”

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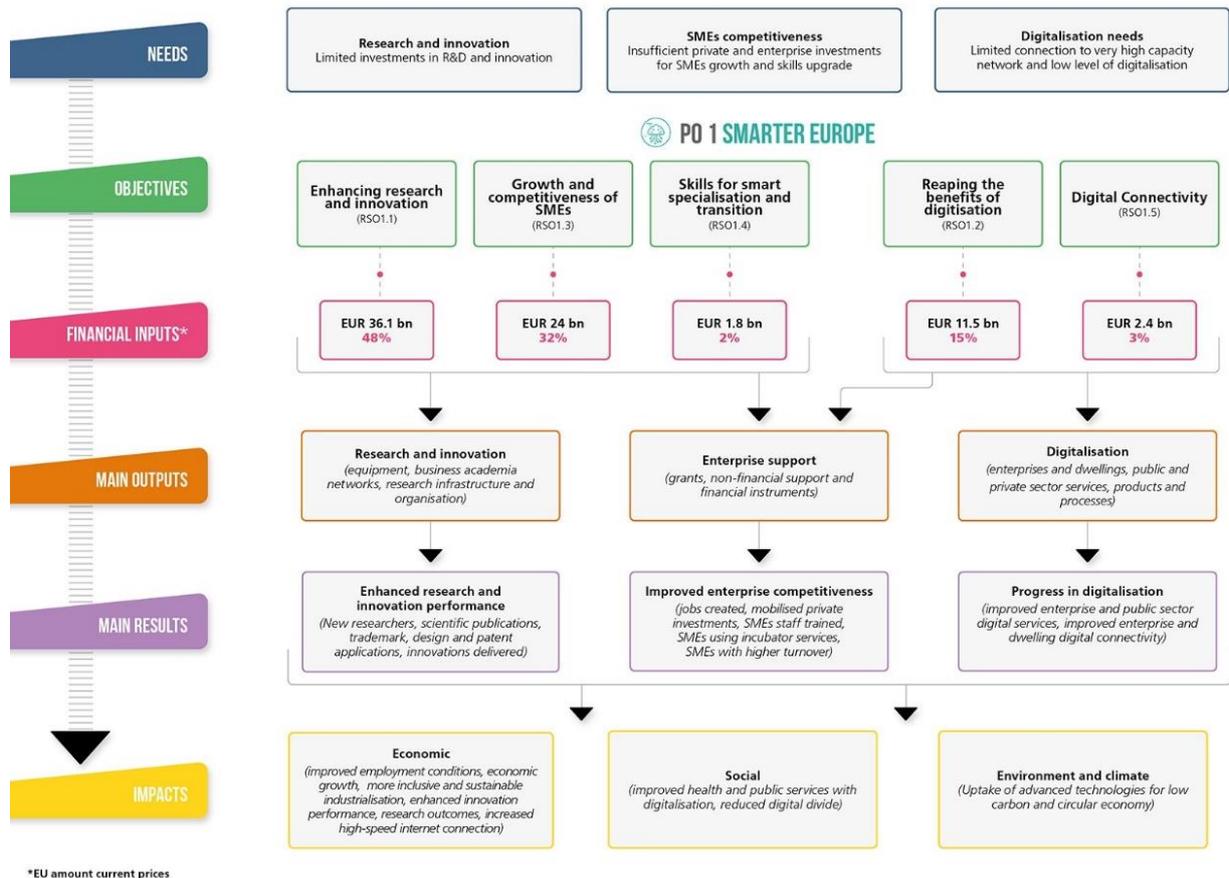
## Policy objective 1: 'Smarter Europe'

This fiche describes the intervention logic of PO 1 and summarises key evaluation findings and lessons learnt. The illustration of the intervention logic covers needs, objectives, inputs, actions, outputs, results and impacts.

# 1. Part 1: Intervention logic

This infographic summarises the main components of the PO 1 intervention logic which are described in the first part of the fiche.

Figure 1 - PO1 Intervention logic illustration



Source: own elaboration

## 1.1. Needs

The 8<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report, like other relevant sources (1), highlights that ‘regional economic convergence has stopped in the EU and divergence could become a threat

(1) See also: EC-DG Regio (2023), Staff working document: Cohesion 2021-2027: forging an Ever Stronger Union Report on the Outcome of 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy Programming. Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés, Lewis Dijkstra, and Hugo Poelman. 2023. The Geography of EU Discontent and the Regional Development Trap. LU: Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/164290>. Lorenzo, X., Arndt, V., & Castilla, C. (2023). The State of Regions and Cities—Managing crises, bringing solutions, building the future (EU Annual

to economic progress at a time when globalisation poses new challenges to economic cohesion'. The capacity to innovate and implement advanced technological solutions are key to ensuring long-term productivity growth and business competitiveness, in particular with increasing worldwide competition.

Research and innovation differences between regions and within Member States can have a major impact on long-term growth and be amplified by digitalisation. R&D expenditure and innovation in the EU have a strong regional dimension, with specific development needs arise that call for policy action to address:

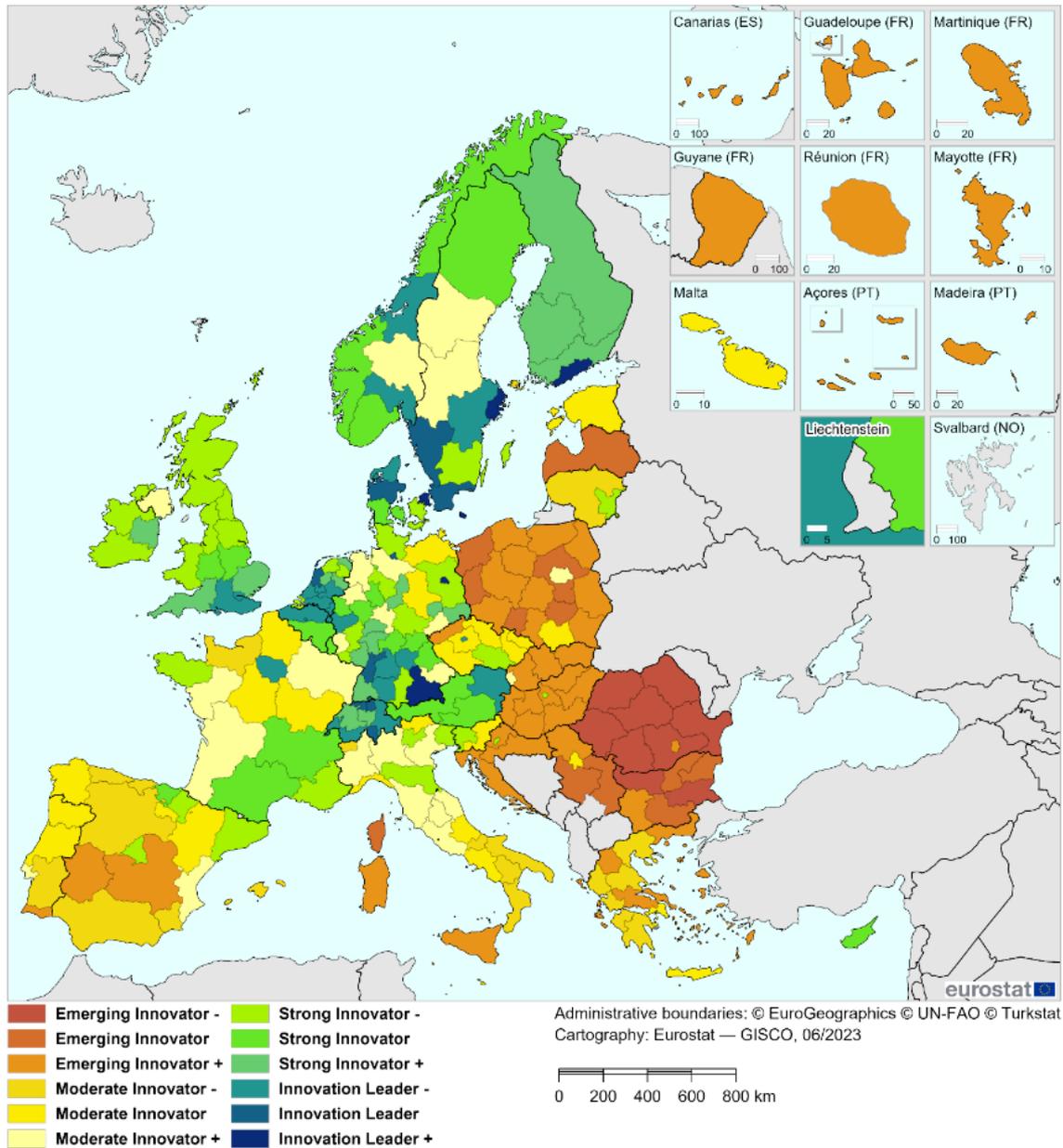
- **Limited investments in R&D and innovation** in particular from private sector and SMEs.
- **Insufficient private and enterprise investment in SME growth and skill upgrades**
- **Limited connection to very high capacity network with insufficient digitalisation** and uptake of digital technologies.

In this context, cohesion policy programmes can be pivotal to supporting innovation, bridging gaps between EU territories, promoting place-based development, industrial transformation and developing skills for 'smart specialisation'. Cohesion policy investments in digital technologies and innovative solutions can promote more inclusive and sustainable growth, create opportunities for people and businesses, modernise the public sector as well as enhance SME competitiveness. The chart shows the innovation performance of EU regions according to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard.

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Report). European Committee of the Regions. Christou, T., Garcia Rodriguez, A., Heidelk, T., Lazarou, N., Monfort, P. and Salotti, S., A RHOMOLO assessment of 2014-2027 cohesion policy, European Commission, Seville, 2024, JRC136790. Sample of Smart Specialisation Strategies and programme documents reviewed in the study.

**Figure 2 - Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023**



Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the European Union.

Source: European Commission – Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023

Source: European Commission (2023)

## 1.2. Objectives

Regional competitiveness and innovation performance depends on drivers such as:

- Research and innovation capacity, SME competitiveness and private investment, skills and capacity notably at enterprise level, to support industrial transition and transformation of the EU economy.
- Uptake of technologies including ICT, with digitalisation and connectivity.

In this regard, RSO 1.1 invests in enhancing research and innovation capacity and implementing advanced technologies.

RSO 1.2 aims at reaping the benefits of digitisation and thus at increasing the uptake and use of ICT for governments, enterprises and citizens.

RSO 1.3 looks to mobilise enterprise investments to enhance sustainable growth and competitiveness for SMEs, as well as support quality job creation.

RSO 1.4 develops skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship to address existing needs for skills upgrade and governance capacity.

RSO 1.5 is about enhancing digital connectivity through infrastructure, including in public and private dwellings and enterprises to make them part of a smarter Europe.

## 1.3. Programme Inputs

### 1.3.1. Financial planned resources

The first part of this section provides an overview with the ERDF planned amount (total EU amount) and its distribution across Member States, specific objectives and categories of regions defined by Article 108 CPR as *less developed*, *transition* and *more developed regions*.

The second part assesses the territorial distribution of the planned financial resources using the intervention fields which primarily refer to the PO, according to the Cohesion data platform correspondence table <sup>(2)</sup>.

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<sup>(2)</sup> [https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2021-2027-Categorisation/Correspondence-21-27-to-14-20-intervention-fields/4s7y-iy43/about\\_data](https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2021-2027-Categorisation/Correspondence-21-27-to-14-20-intervention-fields/4s7y-iy43/about_data)

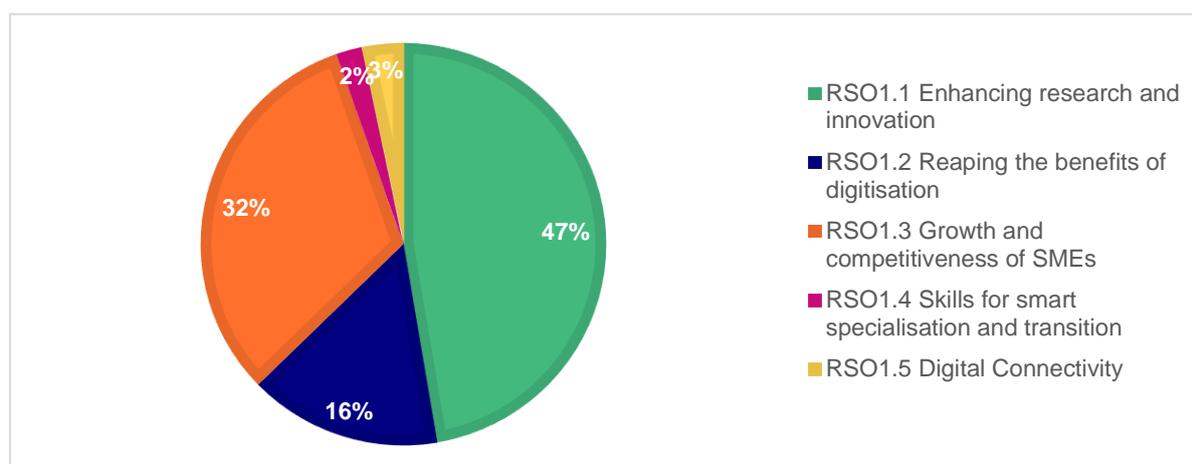
## General overview

PO 1 ERDF funding is about EUR 73.9 bn <sup>(3)</sup>, more than 1/3 of the ERDF total.

The share of planned EU investments under PO1 varies substantially across Member States: lowest levels in Romanian and Malta, while the top values are in Sweden and Luxembourg. ERDF regulation article 4 thematic concentration rules have a considerable influence on Member State thematic focus choices. Nonetheless, PO 1 ERDF resources benefit less developed regions to a lesser extent than other POs. In total 72% of the ERDF total is for less developed regions, 9% for more developed ones, 18% for transition and about 1% for outermost or northern sparsely populated areas. For PO 1, 63% is for less developed regions, 14% for developed regions, 22% for transition regions and about 1% for outermost or northern sparsely populated area.

Most of PO 1 ERDF funding is under RSO 1.1 enhancing research and innovation, followed by RSO 1.3 for SME growth and competitiveness and RSO 1.2 for digitisation. RSOs 1.4 and 1.5 have a minor share of the PO 1 budget.

**Figure 3 - Distribution of PO 1 EU amount (ERDF) between RSOs**



Source: Consortium elaboration, based on data from the Cohesion data platform (February 2024)

Categories of regions also distribute PO 1 resources differently. PO 1 investments are less concentrated in less developed regions than other POs.

- More developed regions allocate approximately 53% of their funding under PO1, ranging from 36% in Slovakia to 73% in Hungary.
- Transition regions allocate approximately 43% of funding under PO1, from 25% in Malta to 70% in Austria, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands.

<sup>(3)</sup> Interreg invests an additional EUR 1.9 bn in PO 1. The total funding (national and EU contribution) is EUR 117.3 bn.

- Less developed regions allocate approximately 31% of funding under PO1, from 21% in Lithuania to 49% in Belgium.

### **Territorial patterns of planned financial resources**

Intervention fields, which are primarily used under PO1 according to the aforementioned correspondence table, notably make up a significantly higher share of funding. EUR 7.5 bn of planned funding associated with intervention fields for PO1 are also used under other POs, resulting in a total of EUR 81 bn being spent under these intervention fields.

These intervention fields support a wide range of topics, including research and innovation (R&I) in SME and larger enterprises as well as research centres, business development, digitalisation of firms and government, innovation and cooperation between institutions, as well as smart specialisation and digital connectivity. Approximately EUR 182 per capita are spent under PO1 across the EU. By type of region, funding per capita varies considerably:

- Less developed regions average EUR 418 for a total of EUR 51.5 bn,
- Transition regions average EUR 162 for a total of EUR 18.4 bn,
- More developed regions average EUR 52 for a total of EUR 11.3 bn.

At regional level, there is particularly high regional per capita funding in Portugal (most notably outermost regions Azores and Madeira), Greece (North Aegean and Western Macedonia), Czechia (Severozápad, Moravskoslezsko) and several Hungarian regions. In Estonia it is also high, but without regional differentiation. There is low per capita funding in France (Ile-de-France, Auvergne), the Netherlands (Utrecht), Luxembourg and Germany (several cities in Baden-Württemberg), which are predominantly urban or urbanised regions with particularly high populations. Across Europe, eastern- and southern European regions as well as eastern parts of Germany and northern parts of Sweden and Finland have comparatively high funding per capita.

Analysis of RSO intervention fields, using the Cohesion Data platform correspondence table, enables estimates of population coverage and per capita funding.

- Intervention fields linked to RSO 1.1 cover 446.9 million people. Per capita funding is EUR 150 in less developed regions, EUR 70 in transition regions and EUR 24 in more developed regions. These investments benefit 133.2 million people in rural areas (some 30% of those covered) with a similar distribution for rural areas by category of region.
- Intervention fields linked to RSO 1.2 cover 409.1 million people. Per capita funding is EUR 61 in less developed, EUR 27 in transition and EUR 9 in more developed regions. The 121.8 million people in rural areas covered are mainly

in less developed regions (45.1 million people), followed by transition (42.3 million) and more developed (34.4 million) regions.

- Intervention fields linked to RSO 1.3 cover more than 447 million people, with almost half (EUR 210.8 million) in more developed regions. Per capita funding is EUR 167 in less developed regions, EUR 52 in regions in transition and EUR 17 in more developed regions. Funding is available in all NUTS 2 regions. These investments benefit 133.3 million people in rural areas, of which 45.1 million are in less developed regions, 44.6 million in more developed regions and 43.6 million in transition regions.
- Intervention fields linked to RSO 1.4 regard approximately 216.1 million people with over half (119.5 m) living in less developed regions. Funding per capita is highest in more developed regions with EUR 29.9, followed by less developed regions (EUR 22.8) and transition regions (EUR 12.4). These investments cover 120 million people in rural areas (approx. 56% of the population covered): 44.1 million people in less developed regions, 33.9 million in more developed and 42 million in transition regions.
- Intervention fields linked to RSO 1.5 cover 396.4 million people. Less developed regions have a funding per capita of EUR 19, while regions in transition have around EUR 8 per capita. Funding for more developed regions is only EUR 109 million, a per capita funding of just EUR 0.7. These investments benefit 73.5 million people in rural areas (some 19% of the population covered). 43.8 million people in less developed region rural areas are covered by intervention fields linked to RSO 1.5, with 5.2 million in more developed regions and 24.5 million in transition regions.

The distribution of financial planned resources on intervention fields primarily associated with PO 1 is compared to territorial regional innovation patterns.

- Some regions have high funding per capita under PO1 and high innovation. These are mostly in northern Europe, as well as Wallonia, with hotspots in Spain and Eastern Germany.
- Typical innovation centres across the EU-27, have relatively less PO1 funding per capita. This includes Dutch and Flemish, as well as some French, Swedish and southern German regions.
- Several Eastern and Spanish regions have comparatively weak innovation performance and high PO1 funding per capita.

Further details are illustrated in Annex 6.3.

### 1.3.2. Administrative and organisational aspects

Co-implementation within multi-fund programmes ensures vertical coordination across sectors and themes and contributes to synergies between the funds and supported investments. Skills are key to promoting innovation and research so ESF+ and ERDF synergies are important.

As indicated below under output indicators, frequent use of financial instruments (see RCO03) shows that programmes had organise specially to manage this delivery by involving local financial agencies, launching ad hoc procurement, or involving EU institutions.

Programmes could involve ad hoc organisations and / or intermediate bodies. For instance, in managing smart specialisation strategy (S3), to satisfy enabling conditions, the Italian Sardegna Region programme involved Sardegna Ricerche in the implementation and coordination of smart specialisation activities in collaboration with regional offices in charge of programming. Other regions directly manage S3 (French Programme of Île-de-France et bassin de la Seine).

#### **Mitigating implementation and capacity-related risks**

The analysis conducted also identifies capacity-related risks. Limited capacity at administrative and beneficiary's level can slow down the implementation as well as delay the full use of EU funds to address the developing needs identified. In this regard, analysis of programme documents shows how and to what extent managing authorities emphasise the importance of administrative capacity to ensure the full use of available financial resources. More precisely, some PO 1 interventions have been designed based on lessons learnt on administrative capacity. The implementation of similar interventions is pivotal to ensuring a smooth and effective programme implementation.

The Bulgarian Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises programme foresees technical assistance to strengthen administrative capacity for high levels of programme management and control. Integrity Pacts during planning, awarding and executing public procurement of high public interest and with a significant corruption risk will be encouraged to ensure sound financial management. In addition, increasing the culture of teamwork should ensure more efficient conflict management, skills for working in stressful situations with smoother time management and internal communication. The Greek programme Kentriki Makedonia – ERDF/ESF+ highlights that will continue using the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Support Mechanism – OneStopLiaisonOffice (OSLO) for S3 coordinating with the Autonomous Innovation and Entrepreneurship Support Directorate. The Romanian Central Region programme will reinforce administrative capacity and staff, simplify procedures and reduce mandatory documents, use SCO and strengthen the helpdesk based on the 2014-2020 national experience.

### 1.3.3. Enabling conditions

Horizontal and thematic enabling conditions are a novelty of the 2021-2027 period. For PO 1, there are two thematic enabling conditions, good governance of national or regional S3 for RSO 1.1 and the national or regional broadband plan for RSO 1.5.

The S3 is an enabling condition under RSO 1.1 and 1.4 but several programmes, in line with their 2014-2020 programming period experience, use it to fertilise other RSOs, in particular RSO 1.3 (see the Croatian Competitiveness and Cohesion programme and the Italian programme of Sardegna region). S3 is important, as confirmed by the survey and interviews with managing authorities, to promote bottom-up identification of relevant investments.

**Table 1 - Thematic enabling conditions (PO1)**

RSO	Thematic enabling condition
1.1 1.4	Good governance of national or regional S3
1.5	National or regional broadband plan

### 1.4. Planned activities under PO 1

Planned activities differ across specific objectives under PO 1. Analysis of sub-themes aggregating Annex I CPR intervention fields enables mapping of planned actions under each RSO of PO 1. Desk review of programmes provides examples. A graph shows types of planned activities for the most complex intervention logic, notably for RSO 1.1 (Enhancing research and innovation), 1.2 (Reaping the benefits of digitisation) and 1.3 (Growth and competitiveness of SMEs). RSO 1.1 (Enhancing research and innovation) actions cover:

- R&I in enterprises, for SMEs (including microenterprises) and large enterprises. These regard fixed and intangible assets and R&I activities.
- R&I in research centres, with investments in fixed and intangible assets and R&I activities.
- Innovation and cooperation, with support for clusters and business networks and innovation processes.
- Technological transfer and cooperation, with a focus on low-carbon and the circular economy, incubation, clusters and networks and innovation in SMEs.

The S3 sets out the basis for those types of actions. For instance, the German Saxony programme supports applied research infrastructure, projects and networks involving public scientific institutions, applied research into energy and climate, as well as intelligent healthcare solutions. The Wallonia programme in Belgium provides support for research into enterprise digitalisation and transformation, equipment, research project development and economic valorisation. The following chart ranks planned actions by EU allocation.

**Figure 4 - RSO 1.1 planned actions**



Source: Consortium elaborations, based on data from the Cohesion data platform (February 2024)

The main RSO 1.2 (Reaping the benefits of digitisation) actions refer to:

- enterprise digitisation, covering both SMEs and large enterprises,
- e-government solutions and services,
- e-inclusion and e-health.

Both the Romanian Southeast Region programme and the French programme of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Massif des Alpes adopt a similar approach investing in SMEs and public sector digitalisation. The following chart ranks planned actions by EU allocation.

**Figure 5 - RSO 1.2 planned actions**



Source: Consortium elaborations, based on data from the Cohesion data platform (February 2024)

The main RSO 1.3 (Growth and competitiveness of SMEs) actions refer to:

- Advanced support services for SMEs,
- Business development and generic support for SMEs and large enterprises,
- Business infrastructure for SMEs,

- Innovation and cooperation, with support for clusters and business networks, innovation processes and technology transfer alongside cooperation as with RSO 1.1 (Enhancing research and innovation),
- Circular economy investments, notably for environmentally friendly production and resource efficiency in SMEs,
- Developing smart specialisation and transition skills, mainly for incubation, supporting spin-offs, spin-outs and start-ups.

According to the Cohesion data indicative correspondence table, the last two types of actions might be related to other specific objectives, RSO 2.6 (Circular economy) and RSO 1.4 (Skills for smart specialisation and transition). Their presence shows the complexity of programme intervention logic.

Programme analysis shows different approaches and various actions under this specific objective. The Irish Southern, Eastern and Midland Regional Programme invests in infrastructure and key staff to deliver innovative solutions and support entrepreneurship, start-ups and scaling companies. The approaches include new small to medium scale regional projects, expanding existing regional ecosystem projects, scoping, preparing and delivering new large-scale regional projects. The Malta programme is developing a business incubation centre and industrial facilities, non-repayable grants for the private sector to stimulate start-ups and enhance business growth, as well as financial instruments.

The following chart ranks planned actions by EU allocation.

**Figure 6 - RSO 1.3 planned actions**



Source: Consortium elaborations, based on data from the Cohesion data platform (February 2024)

RSO 1.4 (Skills for smart specialisation and transition) supports capacity building and skills generation for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship, incubation, spinoffs, spinouts and start-ups as well as innovation processes. The

Croatian programme 'Competitiveness and cohesion' covers education and training, capacity building and qualitative services for entrepreneurs, business consulting and mentoring, as well as promoting and encouraging youth entrepreneurial culture at all levels of education. The Italian regional Sardegna programme supports the development of competencies for the smart specialisation oriented to industrial transition in tight coordination and synergy with the ESF+ programme.

RSO 1.5 (Digital connectivity) supports digital connectivity for very high-capacity broadband infrastructure and other types of ICT infrastructure. The Spanish Andalusia region programme focuses on the deployment of very high capacity broadband networks in urban and rural areas.

## 1.5. Output

The following table covers common output indicators across specific objectives and their target values for 2029 by RSO. Output indicators capture deliverables and realisations for each RSO. This analysis focuses only on common output indicators. Across all RSOs in PO 1, common output indicators represent 80-90% of the total common and programme-specific indicators. Output indicators are presented in categories according to their headings, with descriptions of their contributions.

**Enterprise support** - All RSOs contribute to enterprise-related output indicators. Both RSO 1.1 and RSO 1.3 cover non-financial support such as advice on internationalisation, capacity building and incubation. RSO 1.1 and RSO 1.3 are the sole contributors to indicator RCO103 on high growth enterprises. Most of the other enterprises supported by RSO 1.1 and 1.2 and all for RSOs 1.4 and 1.5, receive grants. Under RSO 1.3, the number of enterprises supported with financial instruments is very close to those receiving grants. RSO 1.3 also supports new enterprises (RCO05) contributing to their survival through incubation (RCO15).

As expected, RSO 1.4 is mainly devoted to increasing skills in SMEs (RCO101) and promoting stakeholder involvement in entrepreneurial discovery (RCO16).

**Research and innovation** - RSO 1.1 has the most significant contribution to research, technological development and innovation. It is the only one investing in research infrastructure and organisations (RCO06 and RCO07), promoting interregional investments (RCO96), research and innovation equipment (RCO08) as well as business and academia networks (RCO10).

**Digitalisation** - RSO 1.5 is the sole contributor to improving digital connectivity for enterprises (RCO42) and dwellings (RCO41). RSO 1.2 is the most relevant for digitising public sector services (RCO14) and digital service products and processes (RCO13). Other RSOs contribute but to a lesser extent.

**Territorial development** – The PO1 contribution goes beyond output indicators associated with the ERDF regulation. RSOs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 contribute to territorial development (RCO74 and RCO75) and RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.3 invests in CLLD and tourism and cultural sites. One Italian programme (Campania Region) invests in disaster management through RSO 1.2.

**Table 2 - Specific objectives and common output indicators**

Indicator	RSO1.1	RSO1.2	RSO1.3	RSO1.4	RSO1.5	Total
RCO01 Firms: All firms (enterprises)	148 118	104 216	451 268	20 556	86	724 244
RCO02 Firms: Grant aided (enterprises)	54 280	57 945	140 465	18 118	86	270 894
RCO03 Firms: Non grant aided (enterprises)	5 098	5 524	119 058			129 680
RCO04 Firms: Advised (enterprises)	94 558	48 726	199 737	1 752		344 773
RCO05 Firms: New Enterprises (enterprises)	5 617	1 063	34 816	170		41 666
RCO06 RTDI: Researchers with improved infrastructure (annual FTE)	83 117					83 117
RCO07 RTDI: ROs in joint research (research institutions)	3 334					3 334
RCO08 RTDI: Value of R+I equipment (euro)	6 191 662 392					6 191 662 392
RCO10 RTDI: Firms cooperating with Ros (number)	41 135					41 135
RCO101 RTDI: SMEs investing in new skills (number)	480		425	64 718		65 623
RCO103 Firms: High growth enterprises supported (number)	847		1 485			2 332
RCO13 Digital: Value of digital services products and processes (euro)	15 000 000	3 013 719 545	12 064 798			3 040 784 343
RCO14 Digital: Public institutions supported for Digital (number)	171	22 449	1		187	22 808
RCO15 Firms: Capacity of incubation created (number)	929	16	8 061	187		9 193
RCO16 RTDI: Stakeholders in entrepreneurial discovery process (number)				7 439		7 439
RCO24 Climate: Investments in disaster management (euro)		10 000 000				10 000 000
RCO41 Digital: Add. dwellings with broadband of v high capacity (number)					3 126 859	3 126 859
RCO42 Digital: Add enterprises with broadband of VHC (number)					356 552	356 552
RCO74 Population covered in integrated territorial development (population)	26 804 071	46 102 145	26 594 380	10 250 971		109 751 567
RCO75 Strategies for integrated territorial development (number)	128	258	191	29		606
RCO77 Number of cultural and tourism sites supported (number)		50	25			75
RCO80 Community-led local development strategies supported (number)		4	84			88

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RCO96 RTDI: Value of Interregional investment (euro)	273 900 000					273 900 000
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Source: Consortium elaboration, based on data from DG REGIO, 2024

## 1.6. Results

The following table covers common output indicators across specific objectives and their targets for 2029 broken down by RSO. The result indicators measure direct and / or immediate effects of operations, with reference to direct addressees. This analysis focuses only on common result indicators. Across all RSOs under PO 1, common result indicators represent 80-90% of the common and programme-specific indicators, with the exception of RSO 1.4. Indeed, in RSO 1.4, common indicators represent 60-70% of the total result indicators used. Following the approach used for outputs, result indicators are presented in categories according to their headings, with descriptions of their contributions.

**Enterprise support** – RSO 1.3 contributes most to job creation (RCR01), indicating that enterprises support is going to create most of the employment opportunities under PO 1. All RSOs contribute to mobilising private investments (RCR02), notably RSO 1.1 and RSO 1.3. Mirroring outputs (for advised companies and incubation support), RSO 1.1 and RSO 1.3 are the most important for incubation services for SMEs (RCR18), followed by RSOs 1.2 and RSO 1.4.

In line with the output indicator analysis, RSO 1.4 covers apprenticeships and training in SMEs (RCR97 and RCR98). However, RSO 1.1 and RSO 1.2 also contribute to SMEs staff training (RCR98).

**Research and innovation** - RSO 1.1 makes the most significant contribution to research, technological development and innovation. It is the only one investing in hiring researchers (RCR102), submitting trademark and design applications (RCR07) and scientific publications (RCR08). RSO 1.1 is very important for submitting patent applications (RCR06) and promoting SME innovation (RCR03, RCO04, RCR05). RSOs 1.2 and 1.4 and more substantially RSO 1.3 contribute to innovation and patent applicants, with the exception of RSO 1.4 for SMEs innovating in-house.

**Digitalisation** – In line with the output analysis, RSO 1.5 is the sole contributor to improving enterprise and dwelling digital connectivity with very high capacity networks (RCR53, RCR54). RSOs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 cover digital services (RCR11), with RSO 1.2 being the most relevant in line with the findings of the output analysis. RSOs 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 cover improved enterprise digital services (RCR12), with RSO 1.2 again the most relevant. RSO 1.2 is also very important to increasing the number of high digital intensity firms, followed by RSO 1.3 and RSO 1.5.

**Territorial development** – The PO1 contribution goes beyond ERDF result indicators. RSO 1.3 contributes to reducing GHG emissions (RCR29, one Greek programme); while RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.3 aim to attract more visitors to tourism and cultural sites (RCR77).

**Table 3 - Specific objectives and common result indicators**

Indicator	RSO1.1	RSO1.2	RSO1.3	RSO1.4	RSO1.5	Total
RCR01 Jobs created in supported entities (annual FTEs)	31 938	1 813	134 453	418		168 622
RCR02 Firms: Private investments (euro)	15 196 229 296	1 201 109 025	27 684 120 120	2 750 13 412	139 086 782	44 495 558 635
RCR03 RTDI: SMEs introducing product or process innovation (enterprises)	28 861	18 572	17 930	65		65 428
RCR04 RTDI: SMEs introducing marketing/organisation innovation (enterprises)	4 248	2 456	6 307	583		13 594
RCR05 RTDI: SMEs innovating in-house (enterprises)	8 778	13	848			9 639
RCR06 RTDI: Patent applications submitted (patent applications)	6 647	140	246	11		7 044
RCR07 RTDI: Trademark and design applications (trademark and design applications)	1 401					1 401
RCR08 RTDI: Publications from supported projects (publications)	46 244					46 244
RCR102 RTDI: New researchers (annual FTEs)	17 799					17 799
RCR11 Digital: Users of new and upgraded public digital services (users / year)	11 053 819	971 240 181	5 079 371		84 180	987 457 551
RCR12 Digital: Users of digital services by enterprises (users / year)	900	1 319 510	790			1 321 200
RCR13 Digital: Enterprises reaching high digital intensity (enterprises)		21 227	38		279	21 544
RCR17 Firms: New enterprises surviving in the market (number)	588		13 639	320		14 547
RCR18 Firms: SMEs using incubator services (number)	262	16	6 088	134		6 500
RCR19 Firms: Enterprises with higher turnover (number)	25	181	29 457			29 663
RCR25 Firms: SMEs with higher value added per employee (number)	643	160	14 617			15 420
RCR29 Climate: Estimated GHG emissions (tonnes CO2 eq./year)			6 975			6 975
RCR53 Digital: Dwellings with broadband to vhc network (number)					1 307 511	1 307 511
RCR54 Digital: Enterprises with broadband to vhc network (number)					150 401	150 401
RCR77 Visitors of cultural and tourism sites (number)		56000	240000			296000
RCR97 Apprenticeships supported in SMEs (persons)				10680		10680
RCR98 RTDI: SMEs staff completing training (participants)	13735	5782		195158		214675

Source: Consortium elaboration, based on data from DG REGIO, 2024

## 1.7. Impacts

Given the early implementation stage, this study only examines expected impact rather than achievements. Article 6 CPR indicates that policy objectives are expected to mobilise funding for environment and climate objectives based on tracking using Annex I CPR intervention fields. Article 9 CPR indicates that the investments will have to respect fundamental rights and comply with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in the implementation of funds, equality between men and women, gender mainstreaming and the integration of a gender perspective as well as take steps prevent discrimination. Policy objectives of the Funds are in line with sustainable development as set out in Article 11 TFEU, taking into account the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement and the 'do no significant harm' principle. This analysis:

- Uses financial planned data to show to how much PO 1 and its related RSOs and planned actions are expected to contribute to climate change and environmental objectives, biodiversity, gender mainstreaming, clean air and the digital transition,
- Examines the contribution to SDGs.

**Analysis of financial tracking**, 33% of PO 1 resources contribute to the digital transition, while 6% goes to climate change objectives, 3% to environmental objectives and clean air, very limited resources to biodiversity.

The most relevant planned actions contributing to climate change, environmental objectives and clean air are:

- R&I low-carbon economy and circular economy under RSO 1.1,
- E-government under RSO 1.2
- Circular economy under RSO 1.3.

This a very limited contribution from RSO 1.4 and RSO 1.5. The highest contribution to climate and environmental objectives is from low-carbon and circular economy investments in RSO 1.1 and 1.3 and e-government solutions in RSO 1.2. For low-carbon and the circular economy, PO 1 investments impact beyond its thematic scope of research, innovation, digitisation and SME competitiveness. PO 1 contributes to climate and environmental related investments in line with PO 2.

The contribution to gender equality of the investments is also earmarked at the EU level, providing some insights on the PO1 expected impacts. The methodology for gender tracking includes two significant scores, which are assigned to actions that positively contribute towards gender equality. These include interventions whose principal objective is to contribute to gender equality or interventions that contribute to

gender equality as a side effect of the actions. An insignificant score is assigned to all the remaining actions. Investments in PO1 contribute to gender equality, at varying degrees among RSOs. The highest share is related to RSO1.1, with a total of EUR 3.5 billion contributing to gender equality. This accounts for only 6% of the RSO1.1, while RSO1.3 and RSO1.4 both have higher share of contribution to gender equality, respectively 7% (EUR 2.4 billion) and 12% (EUR 230 million). Lastly, RSO1.2 and RSO1.5 contribute less than 5% of their budget to gender equality objectives.

**Contribution to SDGs** - The expected impact of PO 1 to SDGs is mainly on SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth and SDG 9 Industry, innovation, infrastructure and to a much lesser extent to SDG 1 No poverty, SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production and SDG 3 Good health and wellbeing. RSO 1.1, RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.5 make a major contribution to SDG 9 but with differences. Though RSO 1.1 and 1.5 invest primarily or exclusively in SDG 9 domains, the RSO 1.2 contribution comes from 'digitising firms'.

RSO 1.3 and 1.4 mainly invest in SDG 8: RSO 1.3 with advanced support services, business development and generic support. Both RSO 1.3 and RSO 1.4 invest in developing and reinforcing skills for smart specialisation and transition.

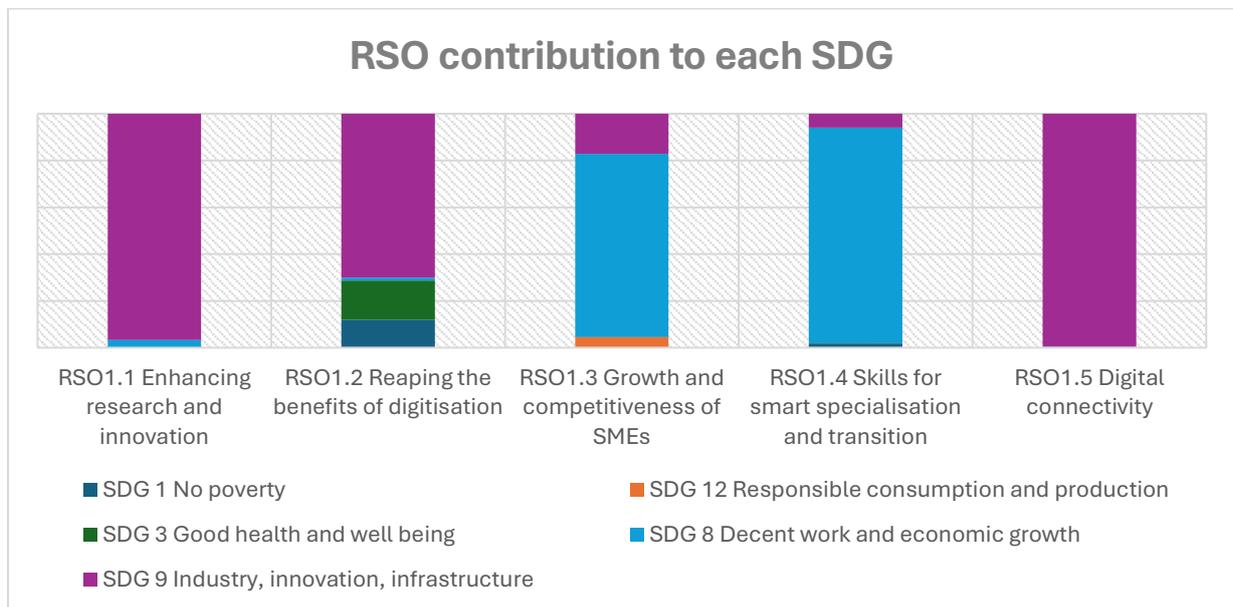
RSO 1.3 planned action on the circular economy is the biggest contribution of PO 1 to SDG 12 'Responsible consumption and production, while RSO 1.2 actions on inclusion and e-health contribute to SDG 1 'No poverty' and SDG 3 'Good health and well-being'.

**Figure 7 - PO 1 contribution to SDGs (based on the EU planned amount)**



Source: Consortium elaboration, based on data from DG REGIO, 2024

**Figure 8: RSO contribution to each SDG (based on the distribution of the EU planned amount)**



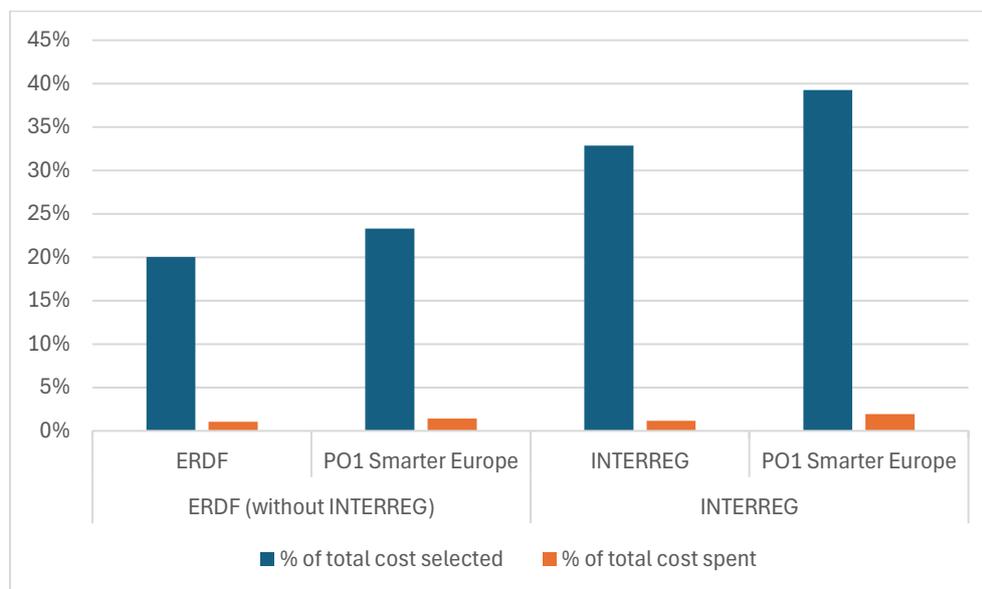
Source: Consortium elaboration, based on data from DG REGIO, 2024

## 2. Part 2: Key evaluation findings from the implementation and lessons learnt

### 2.1. Current implementation progress

The figure below illustrates the financial progress of programmes in the first half of 2024 <sup>(4)</sup>. PO1 decided resources for ERDF were EUR 17.2 billion and for Interreg, EUR 701 million. The share of financial resources already spent is marginal for fund total allocation and for PO1. Under PO1, only EUR 1.04 billion of ERDF (without Interreg) was spent as of June 2024, 1.4% of the total.

**Figure 9 - Decided and spent value by fund (PO1 and total), share of total allocation**



Source: Consortium elaborations, based on data from DG Regio, 2024

The output indicators for number of enterprises cooperating with research organisations (RCO10) and number of enterprises receiving support (RCO01) are the most advanced in terms of 2024 achievements. Among the enterprises receiving support, the most advanced indicators are linked to non-financial support (RCO04) and grant (RCO02), while enterprises supported through financial instruments (RCO03) show less achievement. Considering decided operations, digitalisation is going well except for indicator RCO14 on digital services, products and processes. There is no progress in terms of decided operations for RCO24, RCO80 and RCO96.

<sup>(4)</sup> 30 June, 2024

The result indicators with some progress cover enterprise support, jobs created in supported enterprises and SMEs introducing innovation.

**Table 4 - Implementation of common output indicators**

Indicator	Unit of measure	Target for 2029 (A)	Milestone for 2024 (B)	Decided value (C)	Implemented value (D)	Progress (C/B)	Progress (D/B)
RCO01 Firms: All firms	enterprises	742 279	139 742	189 203	13 931	135.4%	10.0%
RCO02 Firms: Grant aided	enterprises	275 120	38 042	52 786	3 407	138.8%	9.0%
RCO03 Firms: Non grant aided	enterprises	124 076	16 267	23 916	1 034	147.0%	6.4%
RCO04 Firms: Advised	enterprises	344 933	74 145	90 377	8 729	121.9%	11.8%
RCO05 Firms: New Enterprises	enterprises	39 217	6 289	8 406	260	133.7%	4.1%
RCO06 RTDI: Researchers with improved infrastructure	annual FTE	82 026	11 852	3 048	621	25.7%	5.2%
RCO07 RTDI: ROs in joint research	research institutions	3 858	567	731	1	128.9%	0.2%
RCO08 RTDI: Value of R+I equipment	euro	6 208 748 695	481 266 840	879 202 626	7 159 114	182.7%	1.5%
RCO10 RTDI: Firms cooperating with Ros	number	41 971	6 907	7 247	1 174	104.9%	17.0%
RCO101 RTDI: SMEs investing in new skills	number	66 936	10 745	15 379	2	143.1%	0.0%
RCO103 Firms: High growth enterprises supported	number	1 932	614	506	36	82.4%	5.9%
RCO13 Digital: Value of digital services, products and processes	euro	2 955 913 117	306 753 356	550 341 047	187 996	179.4%	0.1%
RCO14 Digital: Public institutions supported for Digital	number	23 542	4 899	1 537	31	31.4%	0.6%
RCO15 Firms: Capacity of incubation created	number	9 238	933	329	32	35.3%	3.4%
RCO16 RTDI: Stakeholders in entrepreneurial discovery process	number	7 156	1 668	593	120	35.6%	7.2%
RCO24 Climate: Investments in disaster management	euro	10 000 000	1 000 000	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
RCO41 Digital: Add. dwellings with broadband of v high capacity	number	3 126 859	787 241	1 436 516	0	182.5%	0.0%

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Indicator	Unit of measure	Target for 2029 (A)	Milestone 2024 (B)	Decided value (C)	Implemented value (D)	Progress (C/B)	Progress (D/B)
RCO42 Digital: Add enterprises with broadband of VHC	number	356 552	101 971	182 006	0	178.5%	0.0%
RCO74 Population covered in integrated territorial development	population	109 751 567	15 922 587	19 050 971	362 133	119.6%	2.3%
RCO75 Strategies for integrated territorial development	number	606	127	56	0	44.1%	0.0%
RCO77 Number of cultural and tourism sites supported	number	75	11	6	0	54.5%	0.0%
RCO80 Community-led local development strategies supported	number	88	23	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
RCO96 RTDI: Value of Interregional investment	euro	273 900 000	73 390 000	0	0	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Consortium elaboration, based on June 2024 data

**Table 5 - Implementation of common result indicators**

Indicators	Unit of measure	Target for 2029	Decided value	Implemented value
RCR01 Jobs created in supported entities	annual FTEs	168 348	38 625	349
RCR02 Firms: Private investments	euro	42 711 860 966	8 534 625 740	203 925 606
RCR03 RTDI: SMEs introducing product or process innovation	enterprises	66 033	10 411	208
RCR04 RTDI: SMEs introducing marketing/organisation innovation	enterprises	14 638	1 943	3
RCR05 RTDI: SMEs innovating in-house	enterprises	9 457	1 334	13
RCR06 RTDI: Patent applications submitted	patent applications	7 005	923	52
RCR07 RTDI: Trademark and design applications	trademark and design applications	1 401	194	82
RCR08 RTDI: Publications from supported projects	publications	55 196	8 376	3
RCR102 RTDI: New researchers	annual FTEs	17 244	969	11
RCR11 Digital: Users of new and upgraded public digital services	users / year	984 758 443	46 626 330	100

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Indicators	Unit of measure	Target for 2029	Decided value	Implemented value
RCR12 Digital: Users of digital services by enterprises	users / year	1 261 752	69 153	0
RCR13 Digital: Enterprises reaching high digital intensity	enterprises	20 296	982	0
RCR17 Firms: New enterprises surviving in the market		14 201	1 094	0
RCR18 Firms: SMEs using incubator services		6 517	54	0
RCR19 Firms: Enterprises with higher turnover		29 292	5 823	13
RCR25 Firms: SMEs with higher value added per employee		15 448	7 298	0
RCR29 Climate: Estimated GHG emissions		6 975	0	0
RCR53 Digital: Dwellings with broadband to vhc network		1 307 511	505 938	0
RCR54 Digital: Enterprises with broadband to vhc network		150 401	63 452	0
RCR77 Visitors of cultural and tourism sites		296 000	0	0
RCR97 Apprenticeships supported in SMEs		10 720	78	0
RCR98 RTDI: SMEs staff completing training		216 618	33 211	0

Source: Consortium elaboration, based on June 2024 data

## 2.2. Emerging challenges and EU citizen needs

This paragraph examines how the sample programmes cover emerging challenges and basic needs of EU citizens and consider partnership and multi-level governance during implementation.

Few of the programmes have addressed demographic challenges such as ageing and depopulation. The specific objective with the most capacity to address demographic challenges is RSO 1.5 on digital connectivity. In RSO 1.1 rural and sparsely populated areas can be a challenge for R&I in the Finnish Innovation and skills programme. In RSO 1.2, the Spanish Castilla-La Mancha also has less populated areas. For RSOs 1.3 and 1.4, the Slovenian programme invests under RSO 1.3 to harness opportunities from the silver economy, while the Swedish Upper Norrland programme refers to significant skills supply challenges due to a sparse and ageing population, a highly gender-segregated labour market, low digitalisation, long distances to colleges and universities and out-migration. Likewise, the Lithuanian programme in RSO 1.3 refers to depopulation which reduces the skilled labour force, increasing cost and reducing innovation capacity. Several programmes investing under RSO 1.5 (Portuguese Algarve programme, Spanish Andalusia and Castilla La Mancha) refer to demographic challenges such as depopulation.

PO 1 investments address EU citizen needs, as classified by the EU Regional Social Progress Index in three categories: basic needs, wellbeing and opportunity needs. The Polish Dolny Śląsk programme addresses basic needs by improving water and environmental quality through RSO 1.1 investments. Several programmes cover wellbeing such as access to basic knowledge, information and communication, health and wellbeing as well as environmental quality through all RSOs. Many programmes use most RSOs to cover opportunity needs such as personal rights, access to advanced education, lifelong learning, tolerance and inclusion, personal freedom and choice.

RSO 1.5 on digital connectivity has the widest coverage for access to public services (education, transport, health, digital) and different needs between rural and urban areas. It can substantially contribute to reducing the digital divide and with that address disparities in access to public services and bridging the urban-rural gap.

The interviews with stakeholders show that, despite challenges, programmes are still very relevant to addressing regional disparities and fostering economic development. They address many emerging challenges, such as environmental sustainability and regional transformation and continue to be highly relevant to addressing current needs within territories. In some Member States efforts have been made to align with regional development guidelines, ensuring programming reflects policy direction. Some programmes apply a territorial perspective to POs 1 (smart) and 2 (green) primarily through mechanisms such as ITI and specific calls in Norte, Portugal. There are territorial-based small, local investments under PO1.

The survey of managing authorities indicates that most address regional disparities in access to public services (education, health, transport and digital services and infrastructure) by concentrating on areas with specific territorial needs. They use specific selection criteria, rather than using territorial instruments and directly involve local partners, even though almost 1/3 of the managing authorities do not apply a territorial perspective to PO 1.

### 2.3. Coherence with other funds and alignment with the European Semester process

There are common trends across Member States and funds: Horizon Europe (HE) is the most consistently cited fund within actions of PO1 specific objectives. In particular RSO 1.1 with the 2021-2027 regulatory framework, promotes interaction as either alternative (Seal of Excellence) or sequential.

More than half the programmes (58%) with RSO 1.1 'Enhancing research and innovation' explicitly refer to HE.

Other funds cited by several programmes under PO1 are: ESF+, the Digital Europe Programme (DEP) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Actions under ESF+ are usually coordinated in programme planning, especially with multi-fund programmes. ESF+ is cited in about 20% of the programmes in the study sample under all RSOs except RSO 1.5. Therefore, ESF+ complements and combines with the ERDF to support research and innovation activities, promoting the uptake of digital technologies, supporting enterprise growth and upskilling for SME staff in line with the smart specialisation strategy. DEP is more consistently cited under RSO1.2 – Reaping the benefits of digitalisation. 30% of the programmes with RSO 1.2 in the study sample explicitly cite DEP, while the PO 1 average is 13%. An interesting synergy between ERDF and DEP is their interaction to set up Digital Innovation Hubs. CAP is less cited compared to DEP, HE and ESF+: around 9% of programmes with PO 1 explicitly refer to CAP, in particular under RSO 1.3 'Growth and competitiveness of SMEs'.

As with programmes, most references to PO1 in Partnership Agreements regard HE, ESF+ and DEP. EMFAF also describes PO1, including demarcation synergies in the Portuguese Partnership Agreement.

For PO1, ERDF is the main fund used to interact with EU funds and instruments. The Technical Support Instrument (TSI) and HE mainly intervene in investments under PO1 priorities, followed by DEP and InvestEU. TSI provides technical support in the form of policy advice, expert support, capacity building, data and statistics collection and the development of common methodologies. The fund intervenes on several themes related to ERDF and PO1, including improving the SME business environment, promoting sustainable sectoral development, as well as supporting research, innovation and digitalisation. Interactions between HE and ERDF are extensive and encompass all HE work programmes which concentrate on R&D&I.

About 48% of programmes in the sample with PO 1 explicitly mention RRF, more often for specific objectives which are likelier to support infrastructure investments such as RSO 1.1 'Enhancing research and innovation', RSO 1.2 'Reaping the benefits of digitisation' and RSO 1.5 'Digital connectivity'. RRP's substantially overlay policy with Cohesion Policy investments under PO1 since interventions targeted by both have significant thematic overlaps, especially investments under the pillars 'digital transformation' and 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth'. RRP's have allocated significant financial resources to the same areas of intervention as PO1, especially since the RRF Regulation provided that each RRP invest at least 20% of the allocation to digital objectives. The RRF with the additional REPowerEU component bolster EU market competitiveness, with 2.8 million companies, mostly SMEs, benefitting from RRF support by the end of 2023. Given the similar thematic concentration, the emphasis within PO1 investments and RRF is therefore on avoiding displacement and double funding. Authorities were requested to describe in their RRP's how they intend to avoid double funding and to differentiate specific measures, activities and projects funded under the RRF and other Union programmes. Nonetheless, RRP's and programmes usually present only general descriptions and possible synergic measures or demarcation mechanisms with cohesion policy funds. There are some examples of more direct demarcation between the funds, as illustrated by the study accompanying the RRF mid-term evaluation <sup>(5)</sup>. For example in Lithuania, 'in the field of the development of the ecosystem for innovative start-ups, the support from Cohesion Policy funds is directed to the start-ups in the region of Central Western Lithuania, while RRF invests into the start-ups in the Capital Region', guaranteeing a geographical demarcation between the two.

The policy focus of key Semester documents, such as Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) and Country Reports and their relationship with Cohesion Policy investments has evolved. In 2019, the Country Reports included Annex D – Investment Guidance on Cohesion Policy Funding 2021- 2027, detailing the preliminary Commission view on priority investment areas and conditions for effective delivery of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy. The following year, Annex D to the 2020 Country Reports reported guidance on investments proposed under the JTF, including eligible territories covered by this fund. In 2021 and 2022, the European Semester was adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of recovery and resilience plans. The 2021 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy indicated that the Commission would temporarily adapt the European Semester to take into account implementation of the RRF. This had a direct effect on European Semester documents, the Country Report focused on assessing implementation of RRP's and common recommendations were presented to all Member States. For these reasons, 2021 is not included in the analysis. For the CSRs, mentions of investments analogous to PO1 increased between 2019 and 2020, then decreased in 2022.

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<sup>(5)</sup> Study supporting the mid-term Evaluation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Case study on the functioning of the RRF and other EU funds, prepared by ECORYS, CEPS, CSIL, NIESR, and Wavestone, 2023

Annex D investment identified in 2019 Country Reports and programme finance details highlight how much programmes cover investment needs mentioned in the European Semester process at least for that year. All investment needs in the 2019 Country Report Annex D are categorised by priority (High Priority Needs, Priority Needs and Needs). These needs are matched with sub-themes (investment corresponding to specific fields), under each policy objective. This ranking of investment needs per subtheme, specific and policy objective is compared with the prioritisation of Member State needs considering the allocated financial resources. Funds have been allocated as to cover most investment needs identified by Annex D of the 2019 Country Reports. For POs 1, 2, 3 and 4 at least 85% of the investment needs identified by Annex D have been addressed by programme financial resources.

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