

Evaluation study of European funds: operationalisation of the Northern Regional Programme 2021-2027

Executive Summary

November 2025

Contracting authority: Northern Regional Coordination and Development
Commission

TECHNICAL SHEET

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Author: Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovação

Global Coordination: Augusto Medina

Technical Staff: Hugo Magalhães, João Medina, Manuel Pinheiro, Sandra Antunes, Sérgio Alves e Susana Loureiro

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, which lays down common provisions concerning European funds, states in Article 44(1) that: “*The Member State or managing authority shall carry out evaluations of programmes in respect of one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and the Union added value, with a view to improving the quality of programme design and implementation.*” Furthermore, paragraph 5 of the same article establishes that: “*The Member State or managing authority shall draw up an evaluation plan (...)*”, under which evaluations are to be carried out.

In line with this regulation, the Evaluation Plan for the Northern Regional Programme 2021-2027 (NORTE 2030), approved by its Monitoring Committee in November 2023, establishes the requirement for several evaluation exercises, including the “Study aimed at evaluating European funds: operationalisation of the Northern Regional Programme 2021-2027”, hereinafter referred to as the Evaluation of the operationalisation of NORTE 2030.

In this context, the Northern Regional Coordination and Development Commission (CCDR-Norte), as the Managing Authority of the NORTE 2030 Programme, commissioned the present evaluation, selecting Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovação (SPI) for its provision.

The main purpose of the Evaluation of the operationalisation of NORTE 2030 was to analyse the extent to which the Programme’s implementation is proceeding as planned and whether it is contributing to the achievement of the expected Programme results.

More specifically, the evaluation aimed to:

- **SO1:** Assess the extent to which NORTE 2030 is addressing the needs it was designed to meet, taking into account any changes in the context in which it operates;
- **SO2:** Assess whether the implementation of NORTE 2030 ensures coherence between interventions programmed under different priority axes and between these and other policy measures and support instruments aligned with the Programme’s objectives;
- **SO3:** Evaluate the adequacy of the strategic and operational management of NORTE 2030 and of the instruments established to ensure high levels of effectiveness and efficiency in its implementation;
- **SO4:** Assess, based on the pace of implementation and supported operations, whether NORTE 2030 is ensuring the conditions necessary for achieving the defined objectives and targets.

Methodology

The evaluation followed a multi-method approach, combining different techniques for data collection and analysis to capture and assess a wide range of perspectives from relevant stakeholders.

An in-depth document analysis was first conducted, including the NORTE 2030 text, EU and national regulations, calls for proposals, and other strategic and regulatory documents, with the aim of understanding the Programme's conceptual and legislative framework. This was complemented by 10 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders between December 2024 and April 2025.

Additionally, two surveys were carried out targeting commercial and non-commercial entities that submitted applications to NORTE 2030, yielding 332 valid responses (220 business and 112 non-business) between 13 and 31 March 2025.

Three focus groups were also held, centred on the following topics: contractualisation with Intermunicipal Entities; contribution of the Monitoring Committee to Programme management; and discussion of the evaluation's preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

This combination of methods allowed the amalgamation of information sources, enhancing the robustness of the analysis, conclusions and recommendations presented.

Conclusions

Implementation and contribution to Programme objectives

- By the end of 2024, 135 calls for proposals had been published across the different priority axes of NORTE 2030, with a total allocation of 2.1 billion euros. By the same date, 3,189 applications had been submitted across these calls, with a total cost of 2.5 billion euros.
- Analysis of the published calls with decisions by specific objective shows high levels of qualified demand (above 75%) in 72.2% of calls. Factors positively contributing to the recorded demand include the existence of a Call Plan, the adequacy of defined eligibilities, and the alignment of support measure objectives with the needs of beneficiaries.
- As of 31 December 2024, the value of all NORTE 2030's output and result indicators was zero. The exception was for output indicators related to Technical Assistance, which had positive values.
- In financial terms, the pace of NORTE 2030 implementation by the end of 2024 was below that foreseen for this phase of the programming period, with commitment and execution rates at only 8.0% and 1.2%, respectively. The current implementation dynamics thus suggest potential difficulties for the future achievement of the established targets, particularly regarding the N+3 rule. However, according to information provided by the NORTE 2030 Managing Authority in October 2025, there is currently validated expenditure and potential expenditure in the pipeline which, given the current regulatory framework, is expected to ensure compliance of this rule in 2025.

Governance model

- The planned governance model is implemented and operational, ensuring compliance with the procedures necessary for smooth implementation of NORTE 2030. However, the composition of the different bodies and the working methodologies show some limitations in mobilising relevant actors and collecting significant contributions to improve Programme effectiveness and efficiency.

Eligibility and selection criteria

- Overall, the eligibility conditions for operations and beneficiaries are considered sufficient for the demand observed in the Region. Exceptions were identified, particularly regarding projects with a construction component (notably under OP2 and OP5), where a combination of required conditions has constrained beneficiaries' ability to submit intended operations.
- Merit criteria are also generally appropriate, although delays were observed in the application assessment process, especially in support types for businesses.

Contracting with Intermunicipal Entities

- There is broad recognition of the advantages of the contract-based approach and of the NUTS III scale for territorial interventions. Despite this, the adoption of a common structure for shaping all contracting processes, in terms of setting objectives, defining operation typologies and allocating budgets, has reduced the capacity of the involved territories and Intermunicipal Entities to differentiate themselves. This has limited the focus on their specific characteristics and needs and, consequently, the scope and effectiveness of the strategies defined. It should be emphasised that the ITI typologies and allocations stem directly from the required alignment with those set out in the Programme, which was previously defined and negotiated with the European Commission before the contracting process. This Programme, in turn, was structured on the basis of a set of priorities and objectives pre-established at European level.

Information Systems

- The SI3 information system, adopted by the NORTE 2030 Managing Authority to support management activities, took time to become operational as it was developed from scratch. It is not yet fully functional. Applications for analysis and decision-making are sometimes incorrectly allocated to Intermediary Bodies, and support modules for management, monitoring, and evaluation such as contracts and payment and amendment modules are still under development. Some delays appear to result from the operationalisation of modules or functionalities in the Funds Portal.

Coordination with other instruments

- As a Regional Programme, NORTE 2030 has a broad thematic scope and shows strong convergence with both the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR) and various Thematic Programmes. A case-by-case analysis indicates efforts have been made to avoid overlapping interventions and competition between programmes, allowing instruments to complement each other in addressing identified constraints. However, there is only limited evidence of true synergies, in which combinations of the

programmes generated benefits that exceed what would be achieved in the absence of such coordination.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this evaluation exercise, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of NORTE 2030 implementation:

R1	Streamline the analysis and selection process for applications, particularly in areas with the greatest delays
R2	Closely monitor the implementation of approved operations to ensure the achievement of NORTE 2030 targets
R3	Consider creating financing lines to support the non-funded portion of approved operations
R4	Ensure the full functionality of SI3, allowing the collection of information to support management, monitoring and evaluation
R5	Accelerate the launch of calls for proposals across all action types under NORTE 2030
R6	Speed up responses to support/information requests from potential beneficiaries
R7	Assess the possibility of revising eligibility conditions for operations and beneficiaries (notably under OP2 and OP5) to avoid constraining applicants
R8	Consider developing a Power BI-type tool providing access to relevant indicators to support monitoring and evaluation
R9	Ensure capacity-building for intermunicipal and municipal structures, particularly regarding the innovative themes and concepts addressed by NORTE 2030
R10	Ensure a better balance between private and public entities in the composition of the Monitoring Committee
R11	Ensure greater engagement of Monitoring Committee members in discussions, implementing new working methods and reflection processes
R12	Improve dissemination of available support and its complementarities with other national and/or EU instruments

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Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovação

