

Evaluation of the operationalisation of Alentejo Regional Programme 2021–2027

Final Report | Executive Summary

September 2025

TECHNICAL FILE

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Object, scope and objectives of the evaluation

1. Regional and Thematic Programmes presented by Member States, organised in a logical and coherent framework regarding National Partnership Agreements, are key instruments for the implementation of the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 and for the achievement of the commitments made by Member States in matters such as research and innovation, ecological transition and climate resilience, urban mobility, employment, social inclusion, education, health and urban development.
2. Reflecting the strategic options that each Member State adopts in response to the Community guidelines set out in the legislative package on Cohesion Policy and national and regional needs, Regional and Thematic Programmes are organised around policy objectives that aim to facilitate the programming process and the sectoral and territorial coordination of interventions under the European Cohesion Policy funds and with other relevant EU policies and instruments.
3. Applied in the NUTS II Alentejo Region (58 municipalities organised in five NUTS III), ALENTEJO 2030 is a crucial instrument for the implementation, at regional level, of Portugal 2030 Strategy's agenda "An externally competitive and internally cohesive country" and also others Strategy's thematic agendas. The Program assumes as its guiding vision: "A Territory with distinctive symbolic capital and identity, endowed with amenities, natural and productive resources, knowledge and skills, open to the world and capable of asserting itself as a reference to invest, work, live and visit". This vision is based on providing the Region with a renewed economic base capable of valuing and enriching its environmental added value, a differentiating factor recognised by the Synthetic Regional Development Index and a competitive argument for "attracting residents, investments and activities that generate employment and social cohesion" (Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Alentejo, 2020).
4. To achieve this vision, the Programme has a total budget of €1.1043 billion in European funds, of which €875.5 million comes from the ERDF, €129.9 million from the ESF and €98.9 million from the JTF. The Programme is structured in five Strategic Objectives linked to the Priorities and Specific Objectives and enabling the implementation of the regional development strategy and the sub-regional strategies of the Intermunicipal Communities (CIM).
5. The overall objectives of the evaluation of the Regional Programme's implementation are to analyse the extent to which the Programme is being implemented as planned and, considering the pace of implementation and execution, to assess whether it is contributing to the maximisation of the expected results, identifying any difficulties in the implementation of the various support measures and/or anticipating potential deviations in the achievement of these results.
6. Complementing the overall objectives, the following specific objectives were defined: (i) Assess the extent to which ALENTEJO 2030 is responding to the needs that support its programming, taking into account any changes in the context in which it operates; (ii) Assess whether the implementation of ALENTEJO 2030 is ensuring consistency between the planned interventions and between these and other policy and support measures/mechanisms that are consistent with the objectives pursued by the Programme; (iii) Assess the effectiveness of the strategic and operational management of ALENTEJO 2030 and the adequacy of the instruments created to ensure high levels of effectiveness and efficiency in its implementation; (iv) Assess, based on the pace of implementation and the operations supported, whether the

implementation of ALENTEJO 2030 is ensuring the necessary conditions for the achievement of the defined objectives and established targets.

Methodology

7. This evaluation is based on a multi-method approach aiming to incorporate a wide range of sensitivities, opinions and key stakeholders, with various valued information-gathering techniques applied:

- **Desk analysis:** a survey of the main bibliographical references was carried out, and relevant documents were selected (ALENTEJO 2030, national and EU regulations, calls for proposals, etc.). The results of the documentary collection and analysis contributed to a deep understanding of the subject of the evaluation and its conceptual and legislative framework at national and EU level.
- **Interviews:** invitations to participate in interviews were addressed to a wide range of entities, with a total of 12 interviews conducted (15 invitations).
- **Survey for entities with applications submitted to ALENTEJO 2030:** two survey templates were prepared, one for business entities and the other for non-business entities (public entities). The previously validated questionnaire surveys were sent out on 7 April 2025, with a reminder sent on 11 April. A total of 358 responses were registered, corresponding to a response rate of 25%.
- **Focus Groups:** as planned, two focus groups with the following objectives were held:
 - ALENTEJO 2030 governance model: conclude on the adequacy of the composition, functioning and contribution of the Monitoring Committee to the proper implementation and effectiveness of the Programme; and conclude on the adequacy of stakeholder involvement in terms of their profile and the form of involvement and communication, identifying the gains resulting from such participation or the losses resulting from its absence.
 - Forms of support, eligibility conditions and selection criteria – Just Transition Fund (JTF): conclude on the adequacy and effectiveness of the forms of support, eligibility conditions and selection criteria in inducing the desired demand (quantitative and qualitative – entities, projects, etc.) – JTF.
- **Case studies:** analysis of three case studies, identified based on the following pre-established selection criteria:
 - Entities with close ties to the territory and increased responsibility for implementing development strategies at sub-regional level: Case study #1 – Comunidade Intermunicipal do Baixo Alentejo;
 - Entity with less history and experience in terms of delegation of competences, but which, in a context of regional prioritisation of innovation and social entrepreneurship, is playing an increasingly important role: Case study #2 – EMPIS;
 - An entity with a consolidated track record in this context of delegating powers in the area of business incentives, but which, given the high volume of projects under its analysis/decision (current and prospective) associated with Incentive Systems and JTF, needs to be analysed in greater detail in order to highlight the

impact of this context on its ability to mobilise the desired demand, select operations and monitor their implementation: Case study #3 – IAPMEI.

Key conclusions in response to evaluation questions (EQ)

8. Based on the responses to the evaluation questions (EQ), the following conclusions were reached:

EQ4 (SubEQ 4.1)

C1. Access to application forms and payment requests is available through the Funds Desk, a platform that allows to submit and track applications for ALENTEJO2030 funding in a simple and independent manner. In the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the focus was on simplifying the application forms through a common application process, with contextual information and help available through the Funds Helpline, reducing the information required to the minimum necessary to comply with the obligations of efficient and effective management of European funds. Based on the results of the consultation (survey) conducted in the evaluation process, it was concluded that the majority of entities that applied to funding calls did not face difficulties in completing the application and payment requests. However, some constraints were identified: i) repetitive fields in the application form; ii) application form with an extensive and unintuitive structure; iii) complexity of the platform, particularly with regard to data submission; iv) computer bugs and programming errors; v) lack of response from the Funds Desk. With regard to the provision of support information to the use of application forms and payment requests, these documents were developed by AD&C at national level and were made available online. In this specific matter the results of the survey show that applicants consider that the available guides have limitations in terms of their usefulness in result of its late availability and lack of information and clarity of the contents.

EQ5 (SubEQ 5.0, 5.5 e 5.6)

C2. ALENTEJO 2030 has been able to mobilise the expected demand, ensuring that candidate operations are aligned with the objectives and support instruments. However, demand remains below the desired level due to several constraints, namely (i) on the supply side, the late closure of the 2014-2020 MFF and constrains in the information system, and (ii) on the demand side, the existence of other support programmes and the limited capacity of entities and the market to respond to the implementation of simultaneous investments. With the publication of 115 calls for proposals, priority 1A, with calls for companies and research and development entities, has registered the highest demand. It should be noted that 43 calls for proposals remain (31 May 2025), a fact that makes difficult to accurately assess demand.

C3. Although the Territorial Plan for Just Transition (PTTJ) of Alentejo Litoral region sets out relevant objectives (economic diversification, sustainable mobility and professional retraining), in general terms it is considered that the implementation of the Just Transition Fund (JTF) has been marked by significant delays, a low execution rate (less than 1%) and a time mismatch in relation to the needs caused by the Sines Thermal Power Plant shutdown. Although it is widely recognised that the general objectives of the JTF are relevant and territorially appropriate, the national response implemented at the time of the plant's closure makes most of the Plan /JTF measures misfit. Several limitations have been identified in the practical application of the Fund: excessive bureaucracy, restrictive eligibility criteria, high minimum investment requirements, lack of flexibility in management, exclusion of initial investment' expenses and concentration of support on large private projects, especially in the tourism sector (hotels), to the detriment of smaller initiatives with an effective impact on the territory and communities. The triangulation of information also highlights the need for strategic reprogramming, with greater support for micro-enterprises, greater coordination between instruments and, above all, a refocusing of support, which should focus on the territory rather than on the power station workers that no longer have the framework identified at the time. Despite the limitations pointed out, the consulted entities considered the JTF useful and generally aligned with the objectives of the PTTJ of the Alentejo Litoral region. However, it was concluded a clear need for adjustments to ensure JTF effectiveness and equity and to enhance its alignment and contribution to the development of the target territory/community and the region.

C4. Considering the publication of 115 calls for proposals, with a budget of approximately €620.9 million, and the submission of 1507 operations with a total requested value of €1,104.8 million, it can be concluded

	that procedural aspects/information systems, namely application forms and payment requests, did not play an inhibiting role in mobilising and achieving the desired demand. However, based on the triangulation of information (desk analysis, questionnaire surveys and interviews), constraints were identified, with references to the slow, unintuitive, repetitive and unclear presentation of fields and subfields, and technical and operational failures (these essentially associated with phases after the submission of applications), which should be taken into account as aspects to be improved.
EQ6 (SubEQ 6.0, 6.1 e 6.3)	<p>C5. The Programme is being able to select operations that contribute to achieve its objectives. However, it was not possible to assess this conclusion in the desired depth since, of the 1507 operations submitted by 31 May, only 35% of the operations had been decided upon, with 905 applications still under analysis. Regarding the analysis, selection and decision-making process, although with notes of the need for improvement in the criteria and conditions of admissibility and in the criteria for analysis of merit, it is generally inferred that the current framework is being able to select projects that contribute to ALENTEJO2030' objectives. The late start of the Programme and publication of specific regulations were identified as critical success factors that have compromised the submission of operations with a potential strategic contribution to regional development (operations with high maturity levels that did not comply with lately regulated requirements).</p> <p>C6. The analysis identified a set of eligibility and merit criteria that enabled the selection of operations aligned with the objectives of the Programme, highlighting the expression given to sub-criteria related to "impact". In general terms, although the types of operation are appropriate to the needs of the beneficiaries and their objectives, aspects to be improved were highlighted, such as: i) result indicators that are inappropriate or unsuitable for the reality of the projects; ii) eligibility and financing criteria that are inappropriate for the reality of the companies; iii) selection criteria that are unclear, unsuitable or inadequate for the public sector; iv) indicators that are unsuitable for the nature of the projects; and v) excessive bureaucracy and lack of clarity and complexity in the application process.</p> <p>C7. With regard to the efficiency of the selection process in terms of decision-making deadlines, procedures and resources allocated to the analysis of applications, it is considered that the Programme is being capable of selecting operations that contribute to the achievement of its objectives. However, it was not possible to assess this conclusion in the desired detail since, of the 1507 operations submitted by 31 May, only 35% of the operations had a decision. It was also possible, through consultation, to infer possible constraints that influence the efficiency of the application selection process, particularly in terms of decision-making deadlines, which are a particularly critical aspect, namely the scarce human resources and limited capacity of teams, as well as a need for greater capacity building of these structures, including Intermediate Bodies.</p>
EQ9 (SubEQ 9.1 e 9.2)	<p>C8. With regard to the dimensioning of the Programme's management structures, related to the shortage of human resources were identified. Around 20% of the planned staff (64 members – teams from the Managing Authority's organisational units) is not filled, despite recruitment efforts. This context has a direct impact on the performance of the functions assigned to the Managing Authority (MA), namely on meeting deadlines. Regarding Intermediate Bodies, the shortage of human resources and reduction in the budget for technical assistance were some of the factors highlighted. With regard to capacity building, there was a clear lack of awareness about the "Roadmap for Capacity Building of the Cohesion Policy Funds Ecosystem for the period 2021-2027" and its impact on improving the performance of the Programme's management structures.</p> <p>C9. Gains were identified in effectiveness and efficiency in the management of the Programme, particularly with regard to the proximity of the Intermediate Bodies to potential funding beneficiaries, which has resulted in the mobilisation of the desired demand (despite the cross-cutting constraints on the implementation of the Programme, are related to the late start of operations and competition with other programmes such as the PRR) and in the selection of operations with highest potential to contribute to its objectives/goals. In some cases, there have also been operational management gains in terms of meeting deadlines, with shorter analysis deadlines compared to those of the MA. However, weaknesses have also been identified, associated with the lack of resources and capacity of the Intermediate Bodies to assume the competences delegated by the MA.</p>
EQ10	C10. The ALENTEJO 2030 Monitoring Committee includes a wide and diverse representation of entities, with a composition considered adequate and valued by most of the entities consulted, although challenges have

(SubEQ 10.1)	been recognised regarding its size, the effective capacity to mobilise members and the models of involvement used, which were considered by most stakeholders to demonstrate the essentially formal and not operational nature of this body. It is considered essential to review the decision-making process and strengthen the role of the Monitoring Committee as a body with the capacity to intervene effectively in the programme implementation process and not only to validate documents, highlighting the importance of analysing new formats to boost its dynamics.
EQ11 (SubEQ11.1)	C11. Despite the efforts made to open calls for proposals with a tender allocation exceeding 50% of ALENTEJO 2030 budget, on 31 May 2025 only €185.7 million of fund had been approved, corresponding to a commitment rate of around 17% and an implementation (fund paid) of €32.5 million, or 2.9% of the value of ALENTEJO 2030 European Funds. Factors already described, such as the delay in the programme's start-up process, along with difficulties related to human and technical resources (the latter including the information management system in place) and the time length of the application analysis process (the responsibility of the Managing Authority and Intermediate Bodies, with particular emphasis on the delay in analysing applications for incentive systems – OP1) are at the basis of the current situation. Although there may be an acceleration in the implementation rate in the short term, with the validation of approved funds, the pace of implementation shows a significant delay compared to what was planned, with direct consequences on the achievement of goals (financial and indicators of achievement and result) initially defined. Regarding beneficiaries, it was pointed difficulties related to payment requests delay with impact in execution feasibility in terms of pace and quality and, ultimately, jeopardizing the financial sustainability of approved operations.
EQ13 (SubEQ 13.1)	C12. The Programme's Communication Plan is, in general, adequate to the purposes of mobilising the desired demand and promoting its notoriety and the support of the European Funds. However, the communication effort, being positive, should be reviewed and improved as stressed in the result of the consultation carried out, since the participation rate in the communication/dissemination actions of ALENTEJO 2030 was low and most participants characterised the actions as not quite useful.

Recommendations from the evaluation

9. Based on the evaluation exercise carried out and subsequent conclusions, a set of recommendations is presented, duly detailed in the Report, for improving the effectiveness and operational efficiency of the implementation of ALENTEJO 2030 and also its visibility:

Recommendations (R)	Articulation with Conclusions (C)
R1. Maintain the commitment on simplifying and improving information systems and supporting documentation.	C1; C2; C4; C5
R2. Strengthen dynamics for mobilizing the desired demand and the selection of operations with the greatest contribution to the objectives of the Programme.	C2; C3, C4; C5; C6; C7
R3. Introduce adjustments to the JTF to ensure its effectiveness and equity and enhance its alignment with the current regional context.	C3
R4. Ensure compliance with the financial implementation targets (including n+3) and the targets set at the level of each of the Programme's specific objectives.	C11
R5. Strengthen the management structure of the Programme, including Intermediate Bodies in terms of resources and capacity building.	C8; C9
R6. Evaluate the Governance Model, namely through new ways of boosting and enhancing the role of the Monitoring Committee.	C10
R7. Strengthen the communication and dissemination strategy of Alentejo 2030 Programme.	C2; C12

