



GOVERNMENT
OF MALTA



Evaluation of the contribution of REACT-EU funds in fostering the resilience of the healthcare system in Malta



EUROPEAN UNION
REACT-EU
European Regional
and Development Fund

EMCS
ADVISORY

Executive Summary

Objective and approach

This evaluation revolves around the investment in health equipment purchased through the REACT-EU funds to foster the resilience of the healthcare system in Malta, which is supported through **Priority Axis (PA) 13 - Fostering resilience in the healthcare system** of Operational Programme I (OPI) - Fostering a competitive and sustainable economy to meet our challenges. PA13 was added to OPI in 2022¹ to cater for REACT-EU funds added to Malta's ERDF programme. The objective of the REACT-EU Priority was to sustain the resilience of the health sector with the aim of achieving the long-term benefits through the roll-out of improved technologies, services and treatment.

The evaluation focuses on four main evaluation criteria, being:(a) effectiveness; (b) efficiency; (c) impact on resilience; and (d) horizontal principles. The evaluation design to address these criteria considers the diverse nature of investments in health services, encompassing 26 distinct sub-interventions through the acquisition of various equipment at MDH, SVDP, or GGH. This results in 26 separate sub-evaluations, each reflecting the varying levels of causal effects in different health services. Recognising this heterogeneity, detailed case studies on 11 sub-interventions, representing 53.25% of the REACT-EU budget were carried out, while the remaining 15 sub-interventions are covered with less detail and triangulation.

Brief description of the intervention

The project under evaluation, titled "Supply of High Technology Equipment for Mater Dei Hospital (ERDF.REACT-EU.13.001)," is implemented by Mater Dei Hospital under the Ministry for Health. It is the sole project funded through REACT-EU via ERDF, with a public eligible value of €11.2 million. This initiative focuses on enhancing health infrastructure, equipment, technologies, and services to improve the resilience of the health sector, ensuring universal access, high-quality care, and sustainable services. For the purpose of this evaluation, the 26 investments in health equipment have been categorised into three main clusters: clinical intervention equipment, diagnostic equipment, and support equipment.

Main findings

EFFECTIVENESS

The evaluation of the project demonstrated significant improvements in service delivery across various health services as a result of investment in new equipment, with notable increases in service volume, quality, and the introduction of new services. Diagnostic services saw substantial growth, such as an 11.9% rise in X-ray procedures and a 62.3% increase in home antibiotic therapy visits when compared to the period prior to the investment. Clinical interventions like lithotripsy procedures experienced a 90% surge, and eye laser clinic attendances grew by 28.27%. Quality improvements were evident with new equipment, leading to better patient outcomes and satisfaction. New services included MRI diagnostics in Gozo and Selective Laser Trabeculoplasty for glaucoma, amongst other

¹ In version 4 of Operational Programme I

services. However, challenges related to human resource capacity were noted across several health services.

EFFICIENCY

Efficiency was enhanced through the introduction of new equipment and technologies, leading to time savings and cost reductions. New X-ray and lithotripsy machines reduced procedure times, while automated sorters and the Liquid Chromatography - LC-MS/MS System sped up non-clinical processes. Cost savings were achieved through reduced maintenance costs, fewer sickness-related absences, and decreased hospital bed occupancy due to earlier discharges. The procurement processes were consistent, focusing on the cheapest administratively and technically compliant offers, with prices paid considered reasonable.

RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Resilience and sustainability were significantly bolstered by the acquisition of the new equipment, which extended the provision of health services and provided essential backup capacity. Hospital managers emphasised the importance of backups and contingency plans, ensuring continuous operation during crises. Maintenance efficiency was achieved by sourcing from the same manufacturer following a competitive process on the open market, enabling streamlined equipment operating procedures. Contingency plans ensured service continuity during downtime, with extensive warranties and service agreements guaranteeing prompt repairs and reliable access to spare parts. Additionally, agreements were in place for expedited part replacements, and essential equipment had backup solutions to maintain continuous patient care. The service agreement approach effectively supported continuous operation, even during equipment maintenance or repairs, ensuring sustainability in healthcare services.

HORIZONTAL PRINCIPLES

The horizontal principles of sustainable development, gender equality, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination were generally upheld across all healthcare interventions assessed as part of this evaluation. Energy efficiency was a major focus, with most new equipment reducing energy consumption and noise pollution. Health services were provided equitably, irrespective of gender, race, disability, or other factors. The prevalence of gender-related health conditions and their connection to the investments in various health services were assessed, concluding that health services were generally comparable for both men and women, with some differences noted based on specific needs. Services were accessible to both Maltese and non-Maltese patients, with adaptations made to cater to the needs of children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. In terms of Partnership, the Managing Authority used the Monitoring Committee process to adopt amendments introducing the REACT-EU Priority Axis. The procedure was deemed reasonable given Malta's size, the technical nature of the intervention, and the need for a swift response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation, several recommendations have been formulated to enhance future measures and support evidence-based policymaking. These recommendations are aimed at improving the effectiveness, efficiency, resilience, and sustainability of healthcare interventions.

- **Defining Resilience:** Whilst this was not a requirement emanating from the Regulation, for evaluation purposes, establishing a clear definition of resilience at the intervention outset would ensure a consistent understanding and more effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of interventions.
- **Addressing Bottlenecks:** Focus on ensuring and maintaining adequate human resources to provide staff backup, which is crucial for the continued resilience of the health sector.
- **Gender Sensitivity:** Regularly assess the gender dimension of investments to ensure gender-responsive budgeting.
- **Increasing Equipment Utilisation:** Enhance the utilisation of equipment that is not being used to its full capacity despite meeting current demands, such as Ophthalmic Lasers and Surgical Microscopes, to improve efficiency while maintaining redundancy to handle shocks, whenever possible.
- **Optimising Energy Efficiency:** Implement strategies to reduce the carbon footprint of high-energy-consuming equipment like MRI machines, as technically feasible, including considerations towards workflow optimisation, waste heat recovery, and investing in renewable energy solutions.
- **Improving Future Evaluations:** Maintain detailed, gender-segregated data, at the patient level capturing output and where feasible, outcome-based data to support comprehensive insights and evidence-based decision-making for future investments.