IDENTIFYING THE KNOWLEDGE OF EUROPEAN FUNDS IN THE
SMEs OF SIBIU COUNTY

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ABSTRACT: European funds grants represent an important resource for the development of business, while at Romanian country level exist a number of Operational Programs in order to provide financial support to enterprises, on the one hand, and indeed for Romanian economy. The starting point of this paper is a research based on a questionnaire among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from Sibiu County, to identify individual opinion within these companies regard to the opportunity provided by the operational programs of their development priorities and the level of access to information on these funds. The need for this research was determined by identifying problems faced by managers of SMEs in terms of accessing European funds grants. Information obtained from the analysis of this part of the research, in addition to their role to highlight the awareness of reimbursable funds among SMEs analyzed, indicates the degree of environmental opportunities and how to take advantage of it. The highlight of these relationships is to demonstrate the complexity of all the elements of growth and performing development SMEs-support.

KEY WORDS: European funds grants, small and medium enterprises.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) aims at a balanced development of the economic activities in all its regions, aiming for their economic and social cohesion. Wishing to become more competitive and dynamic economically and socially, the EU aims achieving goals such as: increasing the rate of employment, fighting poverty, improving access to education, higher investment in research and technology, more efficient use of energy and promoting clean technologies to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. To achieve these goals, and more, the European Commission has created a series of structural instruments designed to stimulate economic growth in the European Union Member States and lead to the reduction of regional disparities.

Because our country is a member of the European Union, there are a number of business development opportunities occurring in the economic environment, such as operational programs that provide grants. Based on these grounds, there has been a questionnaire-based research among the Small and medium enterprises in Sibiu County, in order to identify the level of awareness of these operational programs among the active staff of the SMEs in Sibiu County. The results show on the one hand the awareness of environmental opportunities, while on the other hand the possibility of their use as a source for further analysis and research, in order to increase the access to operational programs for the period 2014-2020.
2. THE ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS ON IDENTIFYING THE LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE OF EU GRANTS WITHIN THE SMEs IN SIBIU COUNTY

Both in the recent years (2007-2013) as well as in the next period (2014 - 2020), the European funds represent a growing opportunity that can be transformed into an important resource for business development and the growth of their performance. Based on this idea, there has been conducted a research within the SMEs in Sibiu County, in order to identify the opinion of individuals in these companies on the opportunity offered by the Operational Programs of priority in their development and the degree of access to information relating to these funds. The importance of this research is determined by the information obtained and their correlation with the level of accessing EU funds, so as to identify the elements that generate performance and growth within the SMEs. The need for this research was determined by identifying the problems faced by managers of the SMEs in terms of accessing non-refundable European funds. The hypothesis which formed the basis of this part argues that among the active individuals of the SMEs there is no exact knowledge of the Operational Programs in general, nor of those that address especially the typology of small and medium sized SMEs.

2.1. Defining demographic characteristics
The demographic characteristics can be divided into two groups: those relating to the analyzed SMEs (main activity, turnover and number of employees) and those relating respondents (the position within the companies subject to questioning, their profession, gender and age). The results of the analyzed company’s demographics and of the respondents are as follow [2]:

- Regarding the field of activity it was found that 51% of the analyzed SMEs are in the service industry, followed by those in the production area (27%).
- Regarding the turnover of the reviewed SMEs, it was found that the largest share (43%) were those with a turnover of less than $ 100,000, followed by those with a turnover of more than EUR 500,000 (29%), the rest of the analyzed business being in the range from 100,000 to 500,000 (28%).
- Regarding the classification of SMEs according to the number of employees, it was found that half are micro - enterprises having less than 10 persons employed (49%), followed by small enterprises (29%);
- The largest part of the respondents has technical studies (53%) and business studies (33%) and in terms of position, they are mainly administrators (30%) or are included in operational posts.
- More than half of the respondents are male (56%) and in terms of age, it was found that most are aged between 30 and 40 years (40%).

2.2. The analysis of the research results on identifying the level of knowledge of information on EU funds within the SMEs in Sibiu County
The assumption behind this part of the research is based on the assertion that „among the active individuals neither of the SMEs there is no exact knowledge of the Operational Programs in general, nor of those that address especially the typology of small and medium sized SMEs”. In order to demonstrate the above said, there were used three questions, whose answers are preset; only one of them is given the opportunity to make different statements about the
topics of that question. The questions for the respondents try to determine the level of knowledge on the existing operational programs in our country, the degree of access to information resources needed to access European funds and the respondents' opinion as to what these funds represent to them.

The first analyzed information is the one on the degree of knowledge among respondents of the OPs, the in order to associate them with SMEs. It was thus established that it is well known that the POSCCE program that addresses the SMEs and their development, 73% of respondents know its targeting. Regarding the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development (POSDRU) program, which refers to the development and improvement of human resources also targeting the SMEs wishing to develop human capital in order to become more competitive companies, we observe that 70% of the respondents are aware of that fact. The Regional Operational Program (POR) is a larger program with specific priority axes and areas of intervention, addressing the SMEs as well. This is not very well known among the respondents of this research because they make the association between the program and the SMEs in a relatively low proportion (34%). Operational Program of Environment (POSM) and Operational Program of Transport (POST) are mainly addressed to large organizations in the public service; there is still the possibility for some SMEs to work with the companies providing public services, being thus able to access these programs. According to the respondents, the operational program POST has a 20%, association with the SMEs whereas the POSM has a higher percentage, namely 27%. The other two operational programs do not address the SMEs, but according to the respondents they consider that these are suitable with the business sector in 24% the PODCA (Operational Program Administrative Capacity Development) and 30% the POAT (Operational Program Technical Assistance), (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. The opinion of the respondents on the types of Operational Programs for the SMEs

Figure 2. The opinion of the respondents on accessing the information on grants

In this part we tried to determine the respondents’ opinion as to what the projects carried out within the grant programs represent, by asking a closed character question. Within the same question there was offered the opportunity
to mention their own opinions. In all the analyzed responses (97%) the respondents' opinion was identified, i.e. the projects carried out under the various grant programs from the European funds represent a business development opportunity for the SMEs. This response indicates only the respondents' opinion on such funds, without any intention to a possible accessing. Although among all respondents there was noticed a positive opinion on the desirability of developing projects by using the grants, one should notice that in our country, the share of SMEs that intend to access structural funds in the future is very low [1, figure 6.4., p. 137].

The access to information on these non-refundable grants can be mainly found on the internet, thus facilitating the knowledge and the identification of the programs suitable with the company's goals. As a result to the relatively easy access to information about European grants, it was established that respondents assert in a fairly large proportion (63%) that they had access to these information resources (fig. 2). This response shows that the respondents had access to information, but without determining the actual situation of their use.

As a result of the identified responses we can say that, among the respondents, these OPs are known in general; it is also recognized their ability to be an opportunity for business development and the access to needed information is favored by the existence of the Internet.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a conclusion, it may be mentioned that the persons within the analyzed SMEs are not fully aware of the Operational Program designed for them, that they had access to information on how they work and unanimously agree that the projects performed within these grant programs are a business development opportunity. The results obtained show that managers and entrepreneurs are mostly informed on the opportunity offered by these operational programs even if they do not intend to access these funds.

In order to increase the access to the EU non-refundable funds and reduce the economic and social disparities between our country and other EU Member States during 2014 - 2020 it is recommended as follows:

- Increasing the level of information of the existing operational programs;
- Creating a more accessible methodology with common terminology in order to be more easily understood, regardless of the professional training of the managers;
- Creating helpful guides on how to classify the project ideas in the areas of interest.

Acknowledgment:
This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133255, Project ID 133255 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

REFERENCES

[3] [http://www.eufinantare.info/po/Programme_Operationale.html](http://www.eufinantare.info/po/Programme_Operationale.html)