

Mid-term Evaluation of the Norte Regional Operational Programme 2014–2020

Executive summary

February 2024



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1. OBJECT, SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

The main objective of the Interim Evaluation of the Norte Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 was to "identify and explain the OP's contribution to the expected results in the SB of each IP mobilised in each of its Priority Axes", which involved: (i) assessing the degree of effectiveness and efficiency of the support granted by the OP, identifying its contribution (cause-effect relationship) to the SBs pursued in each IP and taking into account the time at which the evaluation is carried out; (ii) identifying the potential or actual impact of the implementation of the OP and its alignment with the Union's strategic objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Norte Region; (iii) identify the European Added Value associated with the implementation and results of the OP; (iv) assess the relevance and coherence of the configuration of the OP in relation to the needs of its primary beneficiaries and the evolution of the context over the programming period, taking into account the effectiveness, efficiency and potential impact revealed by the OP; v. learn about the results of the NORTE 2020 communication strategy in terms of awareness, reputation and interaction.

The North 2020 OP

The Norte Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 is the leading financial instrument available to the Region for implementing the regional development strategy for the 2014-2020 period within the framework of the European Union's (EU) Regional Policy. It is complemented by other financial instruments that make up Portugal 2020.

The main objectives of the Operational Programme are to promote the economic, social and territorial development of the Norte Region through the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). The Programme's objectives include increasing the competitiveness and internationalisation of the Region's economy, promoting territorial cohesion and improving people's living conditions by supporting education, training, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, the environment and sustainability projects. The Programme also aims to promote social inclusion, combat poverty and discrimination, and strengthen the institutional and administrative capacity of regional and local entities, in line with the EU's strategic objectives for the 2014-2020 period.

The state of play on 31 December 2021

By the evaluation cut-off date of 31 December 2021, Norte 2020 had approved 12,686 operations.

Considering the demand that, after admission, met the merit criteria (qualified demand), it can be seen that around a third of the Calls for Applications (CAAs) used up the allocation put out to tender. Most CAAs showed qualified demand rates of over 75%, with no significant problems with take-up, in line with the overall figure for all the CAAs launched by the Programme (57%).

A comparative analysis of Norte 2020's commitment and realisation rates reveals differences between the Priority Axes. The Programme's overall figures in these indicators (106% and 58%, respectively) were partly influenced by the performance of Axes 2, 5 and 8 (SME Competitiveness, Urban System, Education and Training), which accounted for 55% of total programming.

Nonetheless, Axis 4 (Environmental Quality) had the Programme's highest implementation rate (surpassed only by Technical Assistance). In contrast, Axis 7, 1 and 9 (Social Inclusion, R&D&I, Institutional Capacity Building) had lower implementation levels than the OP average. In addition, all the Axes showed high levels of commitment (except for Axis 6 - Employment), reflecting high demand for most of the types of operation

they cover, which indicates that the Axes can eventually accommodate a drop in some execution without jeopardising the financial execution of Norte 2020.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the mid-term evaluation of the Norte Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 focuses on an approach based on Theory-Based Evaluation (TBA), contemplating different levels of depth of analysis according to the Types of Intervention (TI).

Specifically, for the objectives already covered by thematic evaluations, the evaluation is based on existing results using simple data collection techniques. For the objectives not covered by these evaluations, the depth varies: in some cases, the requirement was lower, focusing only on analysing effectiveness and efficiency; in other cases, the evaluation was more in-depth, mobilising all methods of collecting and analysing information and mobilising ABT.

The methodology followed emphasises the Theory of Change (ToC) underlying the Investment Priorities covered by the option in greater depth, requiring a thorough assessment process. This process included defining the rationale of the ToC and its graphical representation, highlighting assumptions and risks associated with each link in the chain of causality. It is important to emphasise that Investment Priorities with implementation below the significant percentage were not considered for further impact assessment.

The development of the TdM was based on a literature review and document analysis, focusing on the evaluation criteria, which are more focused on results than the operational process of the typologies. The methodology adopted, therefore, aimed to understand not only the "attribution" of results to interventions but mainly the "contribution" of these interventions through causal mechanisms that explain the production of results. This approach allowed for a richer and more detailed analysis of the Programme's impacts, considering the different contexts and variables involved.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Internal and External Relevance / Coherence

Norte 2020 programming was conceived during a challenging period for Portugal while implementing the Economic and Financial Assistance Programme (PAEF), significantly impacting the Programme's decisions. This problematic context was reflected in the public policies adopted, seeking to respond to the problems faced by the Region, such as high unemployment and funding difficulties. The strategy included the definition of vital sectoral and regional benchmarks, such as the Regional Strategy for Intelligent Specialisation in the North. It engaged critical partners through the Norte 2020 Initiative to promote debates and consensus on regional development.

There was a considerable effort to align the Programme with the Region's needs, using planning instruments that defined the objectives and priorities. However, despite the intention to respond globally to the development needs of the North, the expectations and specific needs of some local and regional actors were not fully met. One-off situations highlighted the lack of involvement of certain key players in the planning phase, especially in energy efficiency and school rehabilitation, limiting the ability to anticipate and deal with operational challenges.

CCDR Norte played a vital role in the programming phase, acting as a coordinating and mobilising force between the various actors in the territory. This facilitated intersectoral coordination and structured dialogue, contributing significantly to successful implementation and achieving impactful results. The allocation of technical assistance to the Intermunicipal Entities, in particular, proved to be a crucial step in

improving the effectiveness of the management of delegated competencies, emphasising the importance of a qualified support structure.

Finally, the reprogramming exercises showed positive adaptability to changes in context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian War, adjusting to new realities and challenges. However, the expectation of complementarity between the different European and national financial instruments was not fully realised, with a significant percentage of promoters reporting difficulties in linking funding or preparing applications due to incompatible deadlines, highlighting an area for improvement for future programming.

Effectiveness

The overall assessment of Norte 2020's performance shows a positive result, with most of the targets of the previously defined indicators being achieved or with favourable prospects achieved by the programme's end. However, there are specific areas, such as vocational training (CET), energy efficiency in companies and public buildings, R&D projects and infrastructures, and institutional capacity building in Local Government, which have faced significant difficulties in meeting the targets set, requiring close attention and monitoring by the Managing Authority (MA).

During the implementation of the Programme, reprogramming was carried out to adjust the financial allocations of the different Axes to the changing context, which affected the mobilisation of demand. Of particular note were the cuts in funding for Axis 2, offset by increases in health, education, cultural heritage and employability, especially to respond to the emerging needs brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Programme's instruments managed to attract qualified demand in various areas but faced challenges in sectors such as energy efficiency and business training, as well as being highly selective in their applications, especially in Axes 1 and 2, due to admissibility and merit criteria. Insufficient funding compared to demand in Business R&D and Entrepreneurship areas also contributed to low project approval rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the main external factor impacting the implementation of the Programme, its effects being aggravated by the war in Ukraine and internal operational challenges, such as predictability in launching tenders and deadlines for analysing applications. Despite these obstacles, the Programme's flexibility in allowing adjustments and changes to projects was widely valued by promoters, facilitating the implementation of operations and contributing to achieving the expected results.

Efficiency

During the programming period, significant changes in the context had a major impact on the performance of Norte 2020. By the cut-off date for the evaluation, although the number of operations approved was higher than planned, financial approval had not yet reached the targets set for 2023.

The Programme's adaptability was evidenced by the reprogramming approved in 2018, which adjusted Norte 2020 to the new needs that have gained relevance over the years, such as the modernisation of public administration. The acceleration of digitalisation and the need for new forms of service provision were some of the areas that deserved special attention, demonstrating the Programme's flexibility in responding to emerging challenges and ensuring that investments meet current demands.

Finally, the analysis highlights the strategic importance of the support mobilised by Norte 2020, which is fundamental for stimulating investment in the Region. However, it points to the need to optimise resources, mainly because of the challenges related to human resources, such as the shortage of qualified professionals to manage and operate the Programme. These challenges, which include the departure of highly specialised professionals and mismatches in public administration pay levels, represent significant obstacles to maximising the results obtained with the resources made available by the Programme.

Impact / European Added Value

The policies that underpin Portugal 2020 and, by extension, Norte 2020 were established in a context characterised by implementing the EFAP. This period was characterised by a significant downturn in domestic demand, only partially offset by an increase in external demand, resulting in recessionary economic impacts, such as a reduction in GDP and employment. These challenges were later exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, especially in 2020 and 2021, directly affecting the performance of the Operational Programme.

The North has shown consistent trends in recent decades in terms of employment structure, with tertiarisation, deindustrialisation and a decline in the importance of the primary sector. Despite deindustrialisation, since 2014, it has remained the most industrialised Region in Portugal, with no significant changes in sectoral productive specialisation. However, there has been a slight trend towards modernisation, with increased technological intensity and knowledge in the regional economy, in line with the operations supported by the Operational Programme, suggesting a positive, albeit limited, impact on regional dynamics.

The business fabric of the North has shown a remarkable ability to align itself with national averages in terms of productivity, technological intensity and qualified employment, benefiting significantly from the interventions of the Norte 2020 Programme. This rapprochement with national averages was particularly evident in the field of employment, where the Programme had a direct positive impact. This progress was accompanied by considerable investment in business Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) in the Region between 2015 and 2021, which saw an increase of 7.25%, surpassing the average for the continent but only behind the Centre region. This performance reflects the effectiveness of Norte 2020 and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in boosting regional competitiveness.

At the same time, there was substantial growth in Research and Development (R&D) investment, with R&D expenditure as a percentage of the Region's GDP increasing significantly from 2014 to 2021. This growth exceeded the national-level figures, although it was not enough to reach the target set by the EU. Notably, companies played a crucial role in this increase, benefiting from the actions to stimulate business R&D promoted by the Programme, which significantly impacted both the private sector and investment in R&D by public entities.

However, insufficient funding for the demand detected limited the scope of the impacts that could have been achieved, suggesting the need to continue and intensify efforts to stimulate R&D to sustain and expand this growth trajectory. The lack of sufficient resources to meet all demands for R&D funding emphasises the importance of a more strategic allocation of available funds, ensuring that R&D investments can generate the desired effects on innovation and technological development in the Region.

The actions of Norte 2020 stimulated investments that would probably not have taken place without the support, demonstrating a solid additionality effect, especially noticeable among non-business promoters. The Axes focused on social inclusion and poverty, R&DT&I and environmental quality stood out for the significant impact of the structural funds. In addition, the Programme managed to leverage investments, generating an additional €0.69 of investment from promoters for every euro funded, reinforcing the effectiveness of interventions through a well-targeted approach anchored in clearly identified needs and priorities.

Communication Strategy

The Norte 2020 Communication Strategy, designed to complement PT 2020, plays a crucial role in the strategic and operational planning for publicising the Programme. This Strategy essentially aims to mobilise target audiences and attract qualified demand, as well as effectively disseminate the results achieved, making a significant contribution to raising awareness of the Programme and creating a positive perception of its impact on regional development. This strategy's success is measured by the ability to attract demand and the effectiveness of disseminating results, highlighting the importance of effective communication in the management of publicly funded programmes.

Although the Strategy was evaluated positively by the majority of actors, it was identified that its impact was more pronounced among non-business promoters than business ones. This suggests an opportunity for improvement in attracting business applications that meet the eligibility and merit criteria, highlighting the need for more targeted communication that can empower business promoters and recognise the crucial role of consultancy firms as essential intermediaries.

The Norte 2020 *website* emerged as the communication tool most valued by promoters, in contrast to the less positive perception of the *call centre* service. This reality points to the need to improve the provision of information faster and more personalised, suggesting a tremendous effort to create easily accessible communication resources that support promoters throughout the application and project implementation phases, such as FAQs and *webinars*.

The strategy implemented was distinguished by innovation and diversification in communication approaches and channels, from organising events to promoting partnerships with the *media*, including the strategic use of social networks. These efforts contributed to a significant increase in awareness of Norte 2020, reflected in the volume and favourability of news stories, attendance at events and European recognition, demonstrating the success of the communication initiatives adopted.

For the future, we suggest using social networks, establishing more partnerships with the *media* to publish simplified and more evident content, and promoting success stories. These actions should be geared towards "storytelling" communication, using simplified language and widening access to information to highlight the tangible impact of the projects funded on the lives of people and companies in the Region, thus reinforcing public perception of the value added by Norte 2020 to regional development.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the 2014-2020 period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
R1. Stimulate the regional R&D and Innovation ecosystem (SO 1.1 of NORTE 2030)	The focus on boosting the regional R&D and Innovation ecosystem based on RIS3 was a successful experience in strengthening regional competitiveness that should be continued and intensified based on the lessons learnt in the 2014-2020 period, recommending, among other things, i. ensure the continuity of support for scientific and technological research infrastructures included in the National Roadmap of Infrastructures of Strategic Interest and others considered essential for the Region (while maintaining robust selectivity mechanisms to avoid dispersion of support and encourage consolidation of the regional infrastructure network), while also considering the eligibility of actions aimed at empowering and raising their stage of maturity and qualifying their "business models"; ii. implement programmes to support the stimulation of the I&DI ecosystem, i.e. programmes to support knowledge transfer activities throughout the innovation cycle (e.g. joint knowledge transfer offices, CoLABs);
R2. Stimulate R&D, especially in business and collaborative projects, favouring coverage of the entire innovation cycle and projects with a high potential for economic value (SO 1.1 of NORTE 2030)	The focus on R&D in the Region has been reflected in a significant increase in the weight of R&D spending as a percentage of GDP, without achieving the targets set at the European level. In a context of scarce resources and with even more ambitious targets for 2030, it is essential not only to maintain the stimulus to R&D, especially business R&D (which grew the most in the 2014-2020 period), but also to focus on projects with a strong impact and the potential for economic valorisation that generate reproductive effects and reduce the dependence of these initiatives on public funds/incentives. To meet this goal, we recommend, among other things, i. ensuring the continuity of support instruments dedicated to stimulating business R&D since the R&D strategy is highly dependent on public incentives, both for individual projects and collaborative projects, through higher funding or higher co-financing rates; ii. valuing R&D projects that include activities to disseminate the results (through eligibility/merit conditions or bonuses).
R3. Continue support for entrepreneurship by reinforcing selectivity	Despite the progress made in strengthening the regional economy's technological intensity, there was no change in the profile of productive specialisation in the Region. Even for the positive trends recorded, the Programme's contribution was relatively limited due to the lower effectiveness of the support, and there was no clear predominance of a profile of supported companies distinct from the "traditional" sectors of the regional economy or

Recommendations for the 2014-2020 period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
<p>mechanisms and training the actors of the Regional Innovation System for Entrepreneurial Discovery. Maintaining support for entrepreneurship, giving priority to the priority areas of the NORTE 2030 Regional S3 and to sectors with high and medium-high technological intensity and leveraged by structured collective actions (SO 1.1 and 1.4 of NORTE 2030)</p>	<p>those with high technological intensity. To increase the effectiveness of the support and boost its impact, it is crucial not only to encourage entrepreneurship projects but also to strengthen the mechanisms for liaising with and governing the players. In this context, we recommend, among other things: i. Maintaining incentives for entrepreneurship, reinforcing selectivity mechanisms to focus on alignment with the priority sectors of S3 NORTE 2030 and high and medium-high technology sectors/technology-based entrepreneurship; promoting the capacity building of the regional innovation ecosystem to facilitate coordination between actors in the Regional Innovation System, their capacity building for smart specialisation, the creation of networks and exploitation of networks and value chains aligned with the potential of the different territories and, in short, the territorialisation of the smart specialisation strategy. These actions will allow for better coordination of entrepreneurial discovery processes, efficiency in the use of resources and mitigation of redundancies between different initiatives.</p>
<p>R4. Maintain incentives for hiring qualified human resources and for training in a business context, favouring more structured training approaches and reinforcing their attractiveness (NORTE 2030 EO 4D)</p>	<p>The Norte Region has made substantial progress, with the contribution of Norte 2020, in improving the qualifications of its working population, with repercussions on productivity. However, there are still difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified labour due to the lack of competitiveness of the remuneration levels on offer. Since attracting and retaining qualified human capital is vital to stimulating the existence of sustainable projects, companies and institutions, as well as productivity (the only variable that will induce economic growth in the following programming cycle), it is essential to continue to encourage the integration of these profiles into the business fabric and induce more significant levels of competitiveness from companies in attracting them. At the same time, support for training has proved less attractive and practical, limiting the Programme's contribution to sustained progress in productivity. To intensify the effectiveness of the support and the trajectory of the current programming period, it is recommended, among others i., to ensure the continuity of support for hiring Highly Qualified Human Resources in the Norte Region, maintaining the Programme's contribution to the positive trajectory of regional employment qualification; ii. Introduce eligibility criteria alignment with S3 NORTE 2030 and/or positive discrimination measures (e.g. merit criteria, funding increases, others that may be relevant) whenever the Highly Qualified Human Resources are to be integrated into research and development or innovation activities (product, production processes, etc.) and especially when involved in TVC activities.</p>
<p>R5. Promote the integration and complementarity of instruments to support innovation, competitiveness and the internationalisation of the regional business fabric to boost impacts (SO 1.1, 1.3 of NORTE 2030)</p>	<p>Strengthening regional business competitiveness should involve strengthening the financing of investments by business entities, specifically by increasing the structural dimension of these processes, by i. publishing a Tender Plan and ensuring compliance with it, given its importance for effective management of expectations on the part of promoters and better predictability of potential demand, speeding up the allocation of the technical and financial resources needed to carry out the procedures within the deadlines set and thus allowing promoters to define action strategies with greater certainty based on the types of investment that will be supported, timings, etc; ii. consider (within the PT 2030 incentive system network) concentrating support schemes for projects of a more structural nature, which include support for R&TD, productive innovation and qualification and internationalisation in single calls for tenders, to ensure that the application goes through the entire life cycle of the project, following the strategies of the business promoters, guaranteeing the optimisation of the project's results and impacts, as well as promoting promoter adherence to this scheme.</p>
<p>R6. Investing in financial instruments (FI) to complement business incentive systems (SO 1.3 of NORTE 2030)</p>	<p>Despite the cyclical implications that have affected the use of Financial Instruments, they represent a complementary instrument to incentive systems relevant to boosting the regional economy. Their commitment should be maintained in 2021-2027 while complying with the following principles/guidelines based on the lessons learned in 2014-2020: i. Establishing the appropriations allocated to this type of instrument in a contained manner and limited to the actual needs of the market on the one hand and, on the other, to what is necessary from a complementary perspective to the PT 2030 incentive systems, in</p>

Recommendations for the 2014-2020 period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
	particular ensuring compatibility with European rules regarding the impossibility of granting repayable subsidies, giving companies even greater freedom of choice in their mix of financing instruments; ii. the thrifty use of these instruments will make it possible, on the one hand, to optimise and leverage resources allocated to business support and, on the other hand, to maintain a focus in the OP's intervention on business support through non-reimbursable grants, contributing to improving the assets and financial situation of companies.
R7. Reconfigure the design of energy efficiency incentives, making them more attractive (SO 2.1 of NORTE 2030)	In line with the national and regional decarbonisation roadmaps and the Climate Law, the regional, national and European challenges in climate action and the energy transition require an intensification of investment in energy efficiency. In this context, in the 2021-2027 period, the Region should, among other things, consider focusing support in this area on non-business beneficiaries (regional and local administration and the social sector), integrating support for energy efficiency in companies into the axes dedicated to business competitiveness, since the need to transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy is an emerging and critical competitiveness factor today. This would allow, on the one hand, a grander scale in support for public entities that are heavy consumers of energy and, on the other, mitigate the risks of low adherence and inefficiency in the OP's action by concentrating efforts on a priority and target group that has proved ineffective in the past.
R8. Maintain the commitment to promoting access to services of general interest by investing in health, education and social facilities networks, strengthening inter-municipal network responses and generating innovative forms of provision. (SO 5.1 of NORTE 2030)	Regional and sub-regional networks of services of general interest are essential to provide equal opportunities for people to access services and to ensure high levels of attractiveness and territorial cohesion. The existence of territories with poor provision of services of general interest, the emergence of new needs dictated by emerging migratory flows and the ageing of the demographic structure, and the need to respond to the ongoing decentralisation process established in Law no. 50/2018 of 16 August (Framework Law on the transfer of powers to local authorities and inter-municipal entities), require continued investment in services of general interest, reinforced by incentives for new forms of provision that ensure greater efficiency.
R9. Intensify the processes of training the ecosystem of funds, especially territorial actors, for the new energy, ecological and digital transition challenges through specific actions and creating (formal and informal) networks for strategic and operational reflection, training and operationalisation (POAT).	The need to find increasingly innovative, cross-cutting and integrated responses to the challenges of regional development requires, on the one hand, the strengthening of networking mechanisms and, on the other, an increase in the levels of capacity of the various players in the design and implementation of investments. In this context, we recommend, among other things, i. creating and/or densifying formal and informal regional and inter-municipal networks to identify everyday needs and opportunities, to consider, reflect on, debate and define strategic and cross-cutting projects of interest to the various Intermunicipal Communities/PAs or to share/think about solutions to overcome common difficulties (for example, in the operationalisation of the contractualisation process); ii. intensifying the mechanisms for implementing and monitoring the RIS3 governance model; iii. Intensifying the capacity-building/training processes for elected representatives and human resources in the Municipalities and Intermunicipal Communities/AMP, as well as reinforcing internal technical staff, in a context of strengthening specific competencies and attributions in the management of core areas for the 2021-2027 contractualisation process (new competences/responsibilities require more qualified resources), as well as to improve the response capacity of these entities in multiple public policies such as S12E, +CO3SO, PIPSE or PAI (Active Inclusion).

Recommendations for the 2014-2020 period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
R10. Strengthen the mechanisms for publicising the results of the projects and the Programme's action in the development of the Region by raising its profile, including through partnerships with the media.	The Region's ownership of the results of the Regional Policy is an essential incentive for accelerating investment and innovation, as well as attracting investment and talent. Against this backdrop, it is suggested that in the 2021-2027 period i., measures be developed to publicise the results and impacts of the Programme's actions, which are accessible to civil society and focus on demonstrating the impact generated on people's lives, leveraged by the innovative and successful measures in the 2014-2020 period (e.g. Faces of the North); ii. partnerships be established with the media (television, radio, newspapers) with a view to mass dissemination of the results and impacts generated by the OP, which could take different formats (e. g., periodic features, regular interviews, columns in newspapers, etc.).(e.g. periodic articles, regular interviews, newspaper columns, etc.); iii. carrying out proactive actions with the media, such as explanatory and clarification meetings/sessions (off the record or any other model deemed appropriate) on the support to be launched in advance, on implementation reports or on publicising the results achieved, which will allow for better understanding (and subsequent communication by these bodies);
R11. Strengthen the mechanisms for publicising support, simplifying language and ensuring channels and content are appropriate for the target public, particularly business promoters.	More excellent knowledge of the support and a perception of less complexity in accessing it is essential for business promoters to take up regional funding on a more massive scale in 2021-2027. To this end, we suggest, among others, i. introducing simple and accessible measures to publicise support, taking advantage of the (good) experiences and success stories implemented during the 2014-2020 programming period (e.g. "tutorials", as in the case of RHAQ); ii. clarifying and better communicating the eligibility conditions for promoters and projects for each type on the websites, in the forms, application tools and user guides (e.g. providing clarification sessions when some AACs are launched, particularly at the start of the programming period or when significant changes occur in the instruments/measures).

Recommendations for the post-2030 implementation period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
R12. Redefine the funding mechanisms for regional policy post-2030, responding to the possible reduction in Cohesion Policy funding, the growing ineligibility of local investment needs and the medium-term funding challenges of decentralisation.	European Regional Policy has been orienting funding towards a pan-European eligibility guideline, creating growing difficulties for local and regional actors in financing particular needs. There should be added to this context, although there is still some uncertainty, a reduction in European funding in the post-2030 period. At the same time, the deepening of decentralisation will increase investment needs at sub-national levels. It is therefore essential to implement new programme mechanisms for financing regional development policy, exclusively national, through the signing of regional development contracts with the CCDR, CIM, AMP and other regional players, complementary to the Regional Programme, supported exclusively by national funds and/or other development support mechanisms (e.g. EIB) to i. safeguard the foreseeable reduction in Cohesion Policy funding after 2029; ii. finance local and regional investment needs that are not eligible under the Cohesion Policy, namely of an infrastructural nature, such as the construction and maintenance of equipment, accessibility or environmental infrastructure; iii. finance regional and municipal investments resulting from the deepening of decentralisation; iv. ensure budgetary predictability and results-orientation for public investment; v. finance the full implementation of PROT Norte in its various dimensions.

Recommendations for the post-2030 implementation period	
Recommendation	Operationalisation
<p>R13. Ensure that the post-2030 fund programming period is supported by regional and inter-municipal strategic planning exercises involving local and regional actors.</p>	<p>The provision of services of general interest should be supported by planning frameworks that increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public investment.</p> <p>In this context, within a framework that requires innovation in the forms of provision, especially in low-density territories where population rarefaction makes it challenging to obtain adequate levels of critical mass, and the consolidation of the decentralisation process over the coming years, it is essential that the investment period over the next decade is prepared based on provision diagnoses.</p> <p>In this context, it is suggested that: i. territorial strategic planning processes on a regional and sub-regional scale be set in motion, which defines, upstream of the programming and contractualisation process, the regional and inter-municipal development visions recommended for each territory according to its specific needs and opportunities; ii. ensure that strategic planning processes are accompanied by mechanisms for capacity building, empowerment, reflection and participation by drawing up a methodological guide for their implementation in advance and making their funding conditional on compliance with a previously defined methodological process, which includes the various stages of involvement, participation and communication; iii. design and implement a capacity building programme in strategic planning for the Capacity Building Communities to support the preparation and conduct of planning exercises; iv. establish mechanisms for communicating, publicising and disseminating regional and sub-regional strategies.</p>
<p>R14. Redefine the approach to urban development, adjusting it to the characteristics of the regional urban system and the diversity of urban centres, differentiating territorial instruments according to the appropriate scale for implementing urban policy.</p>	<p>The assessment of the urban development model adopted reveals an approach marked by regional homogeneity, indifference to the structuring potential of urban centres and an emphasis on the intra-urban scale without adequate consideration of the ability to articulate with RIS3. This scenario will likely worsen with the changes envisaged in the design of Portugal 2030, mainly due to the elimination of urban policy instruments managed by urban authorities and their absorption into the ITI CIM, which could dilute the focus on effective urban policies.</p> <p>For the post-2030 period, a focus on three scales of urban development is recommended: local, inter-municipal and regional. Each scale should address specific challenges, from improvements in infrastructure and proximity services at the local level to transport issues and services of general interest at the inter-municipal level, culminating in a focus on services and infrastructure at the regional level that can boost internationalisation and economic strengthening.</p> <p>This three-dimensional model of urban development should also adapt to sub-regional realities and promote an inclusive and capable urban policy that maximises each area's potential, recognising the importance of a strategic and integrated approach to sustainable and competitive urban development in the long term.</p>

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