CONDITIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction/background: Obtaining funding for the implementation of a project entails the need to adapt the project to the requirements set by the European Union, as well as adequate competence on the part of the project team. This was particularly difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic, as even the most experienced and specialised teams could not fully anticipate the pandemic situation, which forced a number of changes in relation to the running of projects. These changes ranged from projects started before the outbreak of the pandemic to those that had already started during the pandemic. Given the authors' personal experience of working on EU projects during this period, there was very little information on how to implement changes in accordance with the health restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Health. At the time of the epidemic, even what appeared to be basic information had to be changed or clarified, however, to comply with the guidelines for implementing European projects. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations and actors implemented projects successfully. The question then is what factors influenced the successful implementation of these projects?

Aim of the paper: The aim of the paper is to identify and define the conditions affecting the successful implementation of EU co-financed projects during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Materials and methods: The study used a diagnostic survey method and desk research analysis, and the research tool used was an original interview questionnaire.

Results and conclusions: The following were identified as the most important factors influencing the success of EU projects during the COVID-19 pandemic: the high level of knowledge of team members and their personality traits, the ability to transfer knowledge effectively, communication skills on the part of the project manager and team members, and the provision of appropriate tools and technology to carry out the work remotely.

Keywords: EU project management, project success, COVID-19, crisis management.

1. Introduction

The possibility of obtaining financial support for projects from European Union (EU) funds has been the subject of enormous interest in Poland in recent years, as it represents an opportunity for development for many entities. The multiplicity of options to choose from among operational programmes that make it possible to obtain financial support from EU funds means that many entities with no experience in running projects decide to submit an application and obtain funding. However, this is connected with the necessity of effective and purposeful spending of the obtained funds, because one of the many conditions for obtaining and using EU funds is their proper public management (Tkaczyński, Świstak, Sztorc, 2011, pp. 23-24). Obtaining funding involves managing the project in accordance with the requirements set by the European Union. The European Union, when awarding funds for a specific project, always imposes certain rules and nomenclature on the implementing entities. Additionally, as indicated by Nistor & Muresan, projects financed by the European Union have special characteristics that differentiate them from other projects and need an adapted type of management (Nistor, Muresan, 2012, pp. 535-542). It also requires the project teams to be competent. However, even the most experienced and specialised teams could not fully anticipate the situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a number of changes in relation to the running of projects. These changes ranged from projects started before the outbreak of the pandemic to those that had already started during the pandemic. Given my personal experience of working on EU projects during this period, there was very little information on how to implement changes in accordance with the health restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Health. At the time of the epidemic, even what appeared to be basic information had to be changed or clarified, however, so as to comply with the guidelines for implementing European projects.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations and actors implemented projects successfully, hence the aim of the paper was to identify factors affecting the successful implementation of projects co-financed by the European Union during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper is organised as follows: the theoretical background section contains issues concerning EU-funded projects. It describes the specifics of EU projects, as well as activities supporting the management of European projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part presents a description of the research methodology - research objectives, research questions, research methods and the research sample. Part Results presents an analysis and interpretation of the research results, including factors influencing the success of EU-funded projects during the pandemic.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Specificity of European projects

There are certain characteristics that a project should have in order to be called a European project, i.e. (Trocki, Grucza, 2007, pp. 13-14):

- clear definition of target groups and final (ultimate) beneficiaries,
- use of specific arrangements for financing, coordinating and managing the project,
- having monitoring and evaluation systems in place,
- having a financial justification - which must show that its implementation will bring more benefits than the resources invested in it.

The thematic range of EU projects that are possible to implement in Poland is extremely wide. Given the multitude of possibilities for obtaining funds, it was necessary to introduce regulations that would differentiate the projects and the way they are carried out in Poland. In relation to the selected geographical scope in this paper, the main document influencing the type of projects implemented is the Detailed Description of Priority Axes of the Regional Operational Programme for the Silesian Voivodeship (DDPA ROP SV) for 2014-2020, version 21.0. This regulation is a kind of compendium of information related to the European Funds in the Silesian Voivodeship, as it contains not only a detailed description of Priority Axes, but also, inter alia, a description of procedures used to select projects for implementation in the Silesian Voivodeship. This regulation is a kind of compendium of information related to European Funds in the Silesian Voivodeship, as it contains not only a detailed description of Priority Axes, but also, inter alia, a description of procedures used to select projects, methods of calculating the contribution of European Funds to projects, financial plans (necessary to assume the implementation of specific projects), as well as - a description of support for additional territorial instruments for the allocation of EU funds, among which we can mention Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) or revitalisation measures (Szczegółowy Opis Osi…, 2021, p. 4).

Furthermore, the main document regulating all issues related to the implementation of EU projects in Poland is the Partnership Agreement. This document regulates and indicates all the directions of the European Union intervention - in other words, these are the problematic issues that large-scale European projects should be able to solve. These issues are usually very complex and therefore require increased financial resources. They can be divided into three main directions: Cohesion Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, Common Fisheries Policy (Szczegółowy Opis Osi…, 2021, p. 4).

Considering the area of activity, the overarching document that has the greatest impact on the implementation of territorial activities in Poland is the Cohesion Policy. It is a set of rules that governs the main investment policy in the European Union and is addressed to all territorial areas of the EU. The Cohesion Policy is implemented through three main funds: (1) European

Regional Development Fund (ERDF), (2) European Social Fund (ESF), (3) Cohesion Fund (Wprowadzenie…, 2014, pp. 1-5).

The document that combines the recommendations indicated in the Partnership Agreement and the Cohesion Policy and also refers directly to the Silesian Voivodeship is the DDPA ROP SV. This document was created on the basis of the "Guidelines for a detailed description of priority axes of national and regional operational programmes 2014-2020", and contains information that refers to the general principles and rules for the implementation of the entire programme, the implementation of individual Priority Axes and measures and sub-measures within their framework.

It should be noted that the above-mentioned documents by no means exhaust the pool of available regulations, as the Guidelines and further regulations should also be referred to when implementing undertakings co-financed from the EU funds. Additionally, in the case of each implemented project, the following should be taken into account as basic documents: the application for project financing, rules of calls for proposals (one for each sub-measure), settlement schedules (called payment application schedules in the nomenclature of EU projects) and information and letters addressed to entities by the Managing Authority.

2.2. Actions to support project management during a crisis situation

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in human life, business (Zhimin Wang, Zixiao Liu, Junyan Liu, 2020), and project management. The COVID-19 pandemic can certainly be categorised as an emergency. It is an infectious disease that is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is transmitted between people during direct contact and causes symptoms similar to seasonal influenza. At the time of the pandemic, information on COVID-19 disease was up to date, so there was a need to constantly review new restrictions and adapt them to project implementation (Duszyński, 2020, p. 10).

Taking into account the medical aspects, the overall situation in the country was regulated by decrees of the Ministry of Health, which affected the regulation of social and professional life throughout Poland, but the situation was so dynamic that it would have been very difficult to track all the changes during the pandemic. This caused considerable difficulties in the implementation of current tasks in projects and the need to take measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Hence, this section of the paper will focus on ways to counteract the negative effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 epidemic had all the hallmarks of a crisis situation. Considering the concept of a project crisis, it can be characterised as an unforeseen event that has potentially negative effects and can significantly cause the implementation of a project in terms of both production and service, employment, condition and even reputation to be significantly prolonged (Wąsowicz, 2004, pp. 282-289). Another definition is indicated by G. Gierszewska, who defines a project crisis as a pile-up of difficulties that cause a threat to the execution of the

main project activities (Goździewska-Nowicka, Janicki, Słupska, 2016, p. 142). The situation with the COVID-19 pandemic therefore fits into the scope of this type of definition.

A project can be considered to be at risk when there are a number of escalating risks that can directly affect the project's exit from the framework. In such situations, it is essential to turn to the underlying assumptions of the implementation of the project in question and consider whether the cost of the endangered project is still feasible for the sponsor and whether the organisation wants to continue with it (Skalik, 2009, p. 228). In the case of EU-funded projects, the document that governs the relationship between the project organisation and the sponsor organisation is the project agreement - for obvious reasons, this includes provisions for dealing with natural disasters and other strictly emergency situations.

In projects, a crisis can trigger specific reactions. On the one hand, its occurrence can be seen as a state of threat to the continued, correct and effective feasibility of a project, but it can also cause the project team together with the project manager to show additional commitment in order to counteract the difficulties. Nevertheless, solving a crisis during project implementation is possible when project managers look at difficult situations from the point of view not only of the symptoms, i.e. how the situation affects the project, but it is also necessary to look at the causes of the situation (Goździewska-Nowicka, Janicki, Słupska, 2016, pp. 141-142). Furthermore, it should be noted that during a COVID-19 pandemic, quantitative and qualitative changes in a macro-organizational environment may result in additional demands and project team may in turn prioritize dealing with COVID-19 demands over their primary tasks (Koch, Schermuly, 2021, pp. 1265-1283).

Considering the possibilities of dealing with a crisis in a project, there are different ways of dealing with difficult situations. These can include:

- problem-solving cycle, i.e. a series of steps to solve a specific problem within a project, and which takes place in three main stages: formulating objectives, creating solutions and selecting the solution to be implemented (Pawlak, 2006, p. 52),

- updating the project risk management plan, which is the result of activities such as risk identification, quantitative risk assessment, risk handling planning and risk monitoring and management (Żurek, 1999, pp. 65-68). It should be remembered that risks exist throughout the life cycle of projects (Rasool, Franck, Denys, Niandou Halidou, 2012, pp. s78-s98) and should be monitored at every stage of the project,

- use of the scheme of rescuing a project at risk, proceeding in three steps: (1) diagnosing those elements that have influenced the possibility of the project's collapse and, on the basis of these, taking decisive actions that will influence the restoration of the project to its original state of implementation, (2) taking intensified action to quickly identify further risks that could occur as a result of the changes introduced in phase one, (3) extending to include an element of defining checkpoints in the project; not only in terms of the plans to be implemented within the project, but also in terms of the results of the project implementation (Kisielnicki, 2011, pp. 138-141),

- using the competences of the project leader or setting up a group of experts to take a team approach to a project at risk, as the experts' knowledge may come from different fields and industries, thus presenting the project at risk in a different light (Skalik, 2009, pp. 229-231),

- implementation of a contingency plan, which is worth starting from the definition of the threat, its identification and then - determining the cause of its occurrence; a number of activities undertaken here by the project manager should focus both on a broader view of the effects to date on the project and also on monitoring the elements that are necessary and most relevant for the further continuation of the project (Skalik, 2009, p. 245),

- examining the decision-making model - in the case of an event such as a global disease, a consultative model of decision-making, in which the person with authority makes the decision but consults the most relevant members of the project team beforehand, seems important (McGary, Wysocki, 2005, p. 246),

- updating the communication plan, which is a component of any project plan and determines, among other things, who will be involved in the communication process, the frequency of contacts and their form (Wróbel, 2007, pp. 125-127). In this context, it is worth mentioning the use of new technologies, as the literature emphasizes that digital technologies help to become more resilient to future disruptions (Hald, Coslugeanu, 2021).

In the contemporary available literature, there are few sources that can explicitly state what to do in the event of a global pandemic that limits direct contact and carries a high risk of serious illness. Hence, all the issues described above are in some way adapted to the new reality. Considerations in topics related to countering project crises and making (often difficult and consequence-laden) decisions can add a new element to the common knowledge on the topic of supporting project management during a COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methods

The aim of the paper was to identify and determine factors influencing the successful implementation of EU co-funded projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the aim, the following research questions had to be answered: i.e. (1) Did the activities and responsibilities of the team members of the EU projects analysed change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What actions were taken by project management as a result of the pandemic? (3) How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect project participants? (4) How were projects implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic evaluated? (5) Is there a need to continue

to use the surrogate activities used during the COVID-19 pandemic during project implementation under 'normal' circumstances?

The diagnostic survey method was chosen to realise the objective adopted in the paper, which consists of collecting information and facts in terms of assessing both functional and structural phenomena. On the occasion of the application of this method, it is also possible to draw conclusions on the dynamics of the development of the above-mentioned phenomena (Apanowicz, 1997, p. 60). Bearing in mind that the nature of the research was individual, and that the information was analysed in relation to each of the respondents, a standardised interview technique was chosen, and for it - a proprietary tool was created, i.e. an interview questionnaire. In addition, the method of document research - desk research - was applied, in this way, using comparative analysis it was possible to juxtapose the subjective statements of the surveyed persons and the factual state, the image of which was the documentation presenting the direct implementation of individual steps in the projects.

The interview questionnaire was designed to ensure that the answers to each question conveyed a sense of the changes being made within the EU project, taking into account the activities implemented during project implementation during pandemic COVID-19. Interviews were conducted among members of the project teams. The interview responses were designed to identify possible changes and their impact in terms of project implementation during pandemic COVID-19 from the perspective of a person involved in working on a specific project. In turn, the documents that were considered in the analysis process were: (1) grant applications presenting model assumptions for project implementation; containing information on budget, indicators, expenditures, funding levels and other substantive information directly serving project implementation, (2) payment applications (substantive and financial reports on interim project implementation), (3) payment application schedules (regulating the frequency of payment applications; defining tranches of individual partial funding), (4) guidelines published by Managing Authorities, (5) letters and decisions (correspondence between project implementers and other stakeholders in a broad sense).

The research carried out covered the period from 1.01.2019 to 30.10.2021 and the territorial scope covered the Silesian Voivodeship.

The collected research material consisted of twelve in-depth interviews. The respondents were both men (one person) and women (eleven people). The youngest person interviewed was 24 years old (female) and the oldest was 41 years old (female). The people taking part in the study were members of the teams of 3 EU projects and they actively participated in the projects described, so that their statements are a complete record of the reality that took place during the time period studied. Prior to the survey, respondents were informed of the confidentiality of the research.

The respondents took part in 3 different projects, which belonged to two different Actions related to EU funding. Project No. 1 and project No. 2 had similar methods of implementation and settlement, while project No. 3 in its assumptions and structure was definitely different

from the previous ones. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the projects in which the respondents participated.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the projects in which respondents were involved

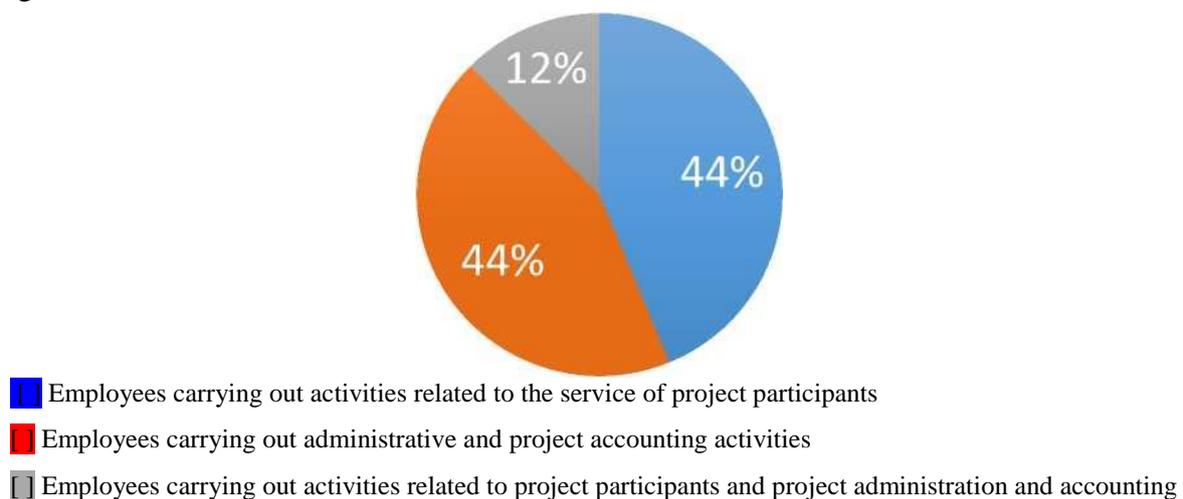|	Project No. 1	Project No. 2	Project No. 3
Priority Axis:	IX. Social inclusion		VII. Regional labour market
Action:	9.1 Active inclusion		7.1 Active forms of counteracting unemployment
Sub-measure 9.1.3	Active inclusion programmes for people and groups at risk of social exclusion – SIA (Strategic Intervention Area)		Improving the employability of jobseekers and unemployed people - competition
Selection mode	competition		competition
Project implementation period	1.01.2019 - 31.12.2020		1.01.2021 - 31.12.2022
Budget	approx. PLN 2.5 million	approx. PLN 2.5 million	approx. PLN 1.5 million
Project objective	increase the level of social activity of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood in a specific municipality by implementing community-based activities of an integrative nature in accordance with the community organising method		increase in the labour market participation of economically inactive, unemployed or under low-wage civil law contracts over 30 years of age through specific vocational support
Number of persons planned to be supported	200	200	108
A project team directly involved in one project	7 persons, including project management	7 persons, including project management	3
Selected key indicators to be achieved	• total number of people taking part in the project (200 per project), • number of people with disabilities participating in the project (20 per project), • number of people who took part in the vocational training and wish to become employed or employed after leaving the project - approximately 35 people per project.		• total number of people taking part in the project (108 in total), • number of people with low qualifications (54 people), • number of unemployed persons supported by the programme (50 persons), • number of people working after leaving the project (61), • number of people who obtained qualifications (40 people), • vocational effectiveness - defined as taking up a job and keeping it for at least three months after leaving the project (61% of all people supported in the project).

Source: own study.

As it results from the analysis of Table 1, Project 1 and Project 2 were implemented by the same entity - a foundation. They had similar assumptions and structure, they were also treated as 'twin' projects in the nomenclature of the Marshal's Office, which meant that they had the same implementation time and very similar project assumptions in common. These projects assumed the implementation of stationary support for people who would be interested in changing their often disadvantaged social situation. The aforementioned support was of an educational and training nature, and all activities undertaken as part of the project had to

comply with the detailed project budget. Project No. 3, on the other hand, was implemented by an enterprise and consisted of structured vocational support aimed directly at the needs of people who were disadvantaged in the labour market. The start of activity in the project was preceded by forms of support related to the identification of needs within specific persons (career counselling, job placement). The next step of participation was to take part in vocational training, which was an opportunity to change or acquire a profession. Selected individuals also had the chance to undertake a paid three-month work placement as part of the project.

4. Results

This section of the paper presents the results obtained. The first of these **concerns the activities and responsibilities of the respondents in the projects analysed**, as shown in Figure 1.

[ ] Employees carrying out activities related to the service of project participants

[ ] Employees carrying out administrative and project accounting activities

[ ] Employees carrying out activities related to project participants and project administration and accounting

Figure 1. Activities and responsibilities of respondents in the analyzed projects.

Source: own study.

12% respondents from the entire study group dealt only with issues related to project accounting which is why for this group carrying out their daily work during the COVID-19 pandemic was not so difficult. For the remaining respondents, it became necessary to find methods that could replace contact with participants in the project. The specificity of the projects described was to support disadvantaged people, so project participants were often elderly people (who find it difficult to switch to communication devices), or jobseekers or the unemployed (these participants in turn often faced a financial barrier and could not afford to switch to remote contact). Therefore, it became necessary to be creative in contacting participants in the project and to find alternative methods of contact, which, on the one hand, would comply with the pandemic restrictions (not endangering one's own and the project participant's health) and, on the other hand, would allow the projects to achieve the right results.

Another element analysed was the **impact of the pandemic on the project's work performance**. It can be inferred from the respondents' answers that there was a change in working conditions as a result of the pandemic. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that there was a virtually complete shift to remote working/hybrid working/shift work in relation to the pandemic period - this was a decision forced by the pandemic restrictions, in which it was important to observe the principles of social distance. However, given that many of the project participants were unable to visit the organisation's premises in any case, due to their age or illness, the decision to change to remote and shift work seems a good one. In addition, the pandemic affected the way existing work duties were carried out. In the initial phase of the epidemic, changes had to be made quickly and with no guarantee of success - as the situation was unknown. The management consulted changes with the middle level, so elements of consultative decision making can be seen. There was also a problem when any staff member ended up on sick leave due to COVID-19 infection, as evidenced by the documents underpinning each staff member's work commitment, such as attendance lists. In addition, when an individual employee became infected with COVID-19, the whole team was placed in quarantine, as described in the payment claims submitted to the Intermediate Body. This meant that decisions had to be made more than once for smaller staff teams.

Project management actions taken in the wake of the pandemic were the next area of study. The results of these analyses are shown in Figure 2.
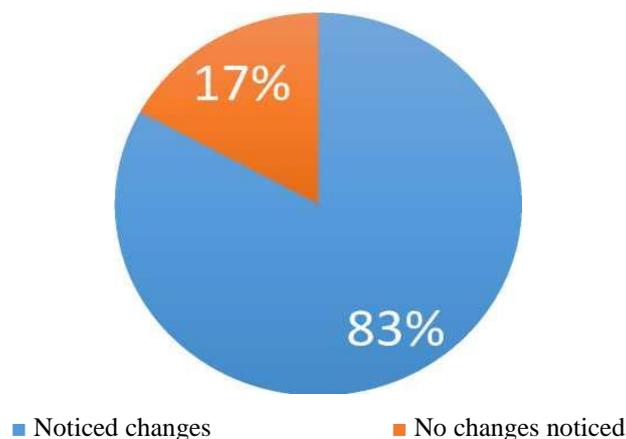
Figure 2. Respondents' assessment of changes in management activities in the face of a pandemic. Source: own study.

As can be seen from the analysis of Figure 2, there is a discrepancy in the answers of the respondents due to which project they worked in and which issues in the project they had to deal with on a daily basis. The project teams in Project No.1 and Project No. 2 (in total 83% of respondents) were generally larger and based on the decisions of the project management. In addition, they were working in a mode of constant change and many unknowns, which compounded unfavourable situations that could cause many problems in their projects. The changes implemented by the management were assessed as sufficient for the project, although there was also a voice that indicated that more could have been done in this regard.

There were also recurring elements of greater flexibility in decision-making regarding staff - laptops and mobile phones were issued to all project team members on the basis of handover protocols. In the case of project 3 (17% od respondents), no major changes were observed - this is due to the fact that the two people hired to handle this project were closely associated with the management and, in addition, started the project at a time when much was already known about the pandemic itself. The need for change at such a point in time was therefore not that great, as can be seen in the statements of the respondents.

With regard to the respondents' response to the topic of the **impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on project participants**, all respondents agreed that project participants felt the changes associated with project implementation. Much depended on the specific characteristics of the individual - older people went through this difficult period in a different way to young people, for example. However, with more and more knowledge available about the disease itself and subsequent cases of the disease, people (in the sense of society) learned over time to live with the pandemic. Participation in the project is no exception. For those who really cared about the support offered, adapting to the new rules went much faster, although one can find statements that some participants wanted to drop out for various reasons. It is worth noting a major change, which none of the respondents wrote about explicitly, but elements of which are present in the statements - is a change in the way of communication. It has changed dramatically, both from the point of view of the team member - project participant (leaving face-to-face communication in favour of remote contact) and also from the point of view of the management - team member (implementation of remote communication methods, remote meetings via the Messenger platform, a large role of telephone contact and even - a group on Whatsapp messenger). One can also notice traces of pandemic restrictions in the statements of Staff carrying out activities related to project participants and project administration and clearance the Staff carrying out activities related to project participants and project administration and clearance respondents - in the projects implemented by the foundation, masks, visors and other personal protective equipment or disposable office supplies were issued on the basis of the attendance lists (when there was already the possibility of group meetings in the projects). However, all the substitution measures described here, aimed at project participants, are nothing more than the creation of new rules of operation in the project, which is directly related to the contingency plan - implemented to ensure that the project has a raison d'etre and produces the predefined results despite the problems.

Considering the respondents' **evaluation of the success of the projects** following the changes imposed by the pandemic, in the case of projects No. 1 and No. 2, in addition to confirming the information obtained from the analysis of the documentation, it can be concluded that many respondents expressed satisfaction with the results of the projects - and not only related to the achievement of indicators, but also satisfaction with helping other people. Thus, it can be concluded that respondents mainly evaluated the success of the project through the prism of the satisfaction of the project recipients, who in this case were the

participants in these projects. In the case of project No. 3, the information obtained from the respondents confirms the picture drawn from the analysis of the documentation, i.e. the project has all the hallmarks of a successful undertaking. This indicates that the stage of preparation of project assumptions, even before the start of its implementation, was correctly realised. The construction of the grant application itself is therefore also correct and with further effective actions and no delays the project has a good chance of success.

The final element of the study was an analysis of whether, in the opinion of the experts, it was justified to **continue carrying out replacement activities** in the projects analysed. Its results are presented in Figure 3.

■ willingness to continue to carry out replacement activities
■ unwillingness to continue replacement activities
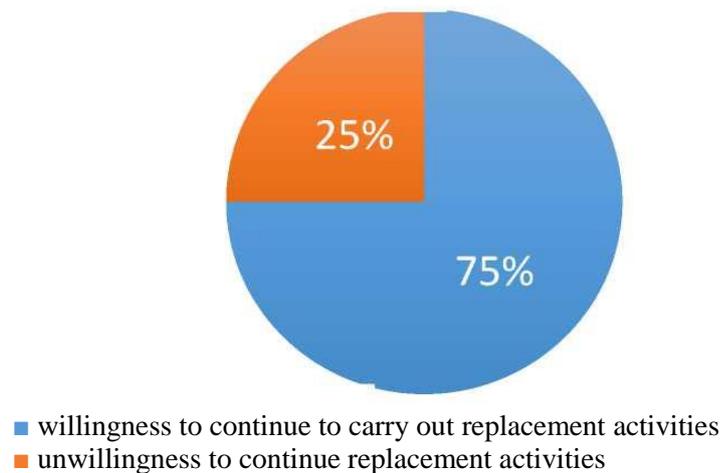
Figure 3. Respondents' willingness to continue replacement activities.
Source: own study.

As can be seen in Figure 3, 25% of respondents have unwillingness to continue to carry out replacement activities and as many as 75% have willingness to continue to carry out replacement activities. In the opinion of the respondents, the pandemic nevertheless brought with it some positive developments that can be used in further project implementation. These are subjective in nature, but show what good can be learned from a project crisis situation. Respondents emphasised here that a form of remote working, electronic documentation or remote meetings should as much as possible be a part of modern work, because in many cases it strongly improves and speeds up activities. At the same time, however, they emphasised that in some situations, such as conducting training courses, direct contact is absolutely necessary. Flexible working hours and the possibility to work any hours were also mentioned as an advantage. Remote recruitment was also pointed out as a good complement to traditional recruitment.

5. Conclusions

In summary, based on the research conducted, it is possible to detail factors that had a positive impact on project implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic and that can be applied to emergency situations. These included:

- appropriately high level of knowledge among project team members of their responsibilities and of the sources of information on the progress and implementation of projects, including: data on risk factors that may affect the implementation of the projects of which they are a part,
- personality factors of the team members, including - the ability to adapt to the current situation, to work under pressure, creativity in the choice of means of communication, the ability to learn quickly and for the project team and project management to have communication competence - also with regard to finding new channels of communication,
- ability to communicate technology-related knowledge effectively to project participants, including older people,
- management's willingness to provide employees with the appropriate tools and technology to perform work remotely if necessary to further support the project implementation,
- management's flexibility in deciding on a work schedule that will promote employee safety.

Acknowledgements

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