

Evaluation of European Funds:
Operationalisation of the Algarve
2030 Regional Programme

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Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. Object, scope and objectives of the Evaluation

The Evaluation of the Operationalisation of the ALGARVE 2030 Regional Programme aims to assess, at an early stage of implementation, whether the Programme is adequately oriented towards achieving its strategic and specific objectives, as well as to identify any need for adjustments to its operationalisation. The central objective of the evaluation is to analyse the external coherence, operational efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme, considering the degree of implementation observed. In addition, the evaluation aims to (i) analyse complementarities, synergies and possible overlaps between ALGARVE 2030 and other public policy instruments; (ii) assess the Programme's capacity to mobilise the desired demand, in quantity and quality; (iii) assess the adequacy of the processes for selecting operations; and (iv) analyse whether the pace of commitment and execution allows the fulfilment of the programmed goals and objectives.

The ALGARVE 2030 Programme is the main instrument for implementing European Union Cohesion Policy in the region for the 2021-2027 programming period and is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). With a programmed allocation of around €780 million, the Programme is aligned with European, national and regional strategic references, adopting an integrated and multilevel intervention logic. Its programmatic architecture promotes articulation between regional, national and EU priorities, as well as complementarity and the creation of synergies with other financing instruments, namely the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR) and territorial cooperation programmes, aiming to maximise the effectiveness of interventions and avoid overlaps.

As of 31 December 2024, ALGARVE 2030 was in an initial phase of operationalisation, registering a reduced overall commitment rate of around 10%. A more favourable performance is observed in the axes associated with qualifications, employment and inclusion, as well as social and territorial cohesion, which concentrate the largest proportion of approved and committed operations. In contrast, the axes related to environmental sustainability, biodiversity, mobility and decarbonisation show significantly lower levels of commitment. The status report also reveals a significant volume of applications submitted, alongside a relevant proportion of processes under analysis, reflecting operational constraints and delays in the start of the Programme.

The information updated on 30 June 2025 shows a significant increase in the number of approved operations and the amount of fund committed, translating into a commitment rate close to 18%, still lower than the Portugal 2030 average. Relevant asymmetries persist between areas of intervention, as well as structural constraints to execution, namely competition with the PRR, limitations in the technical and human capacity of promoters, shortage of manpower and difficulties in the works market. Despite the optimism expressed by the beneficiaries regarding the fulfilment of the contracted targets, the delays at the start and the low financial execution pose relevant risks to the full and timely achievement of the objectives and targets of the Programme.

2. Methodology

The methodology adopted is based on a multi-method approach, of an integrated and pluralistic nature, appropriate to the complexity inherent in evaluating public policy instruments for regional development. This approach aims to ensure a systematic analysis of external coherence, operational efficiency and effectiveness, while mobilising quantitative and qualitative information. The methodological design is articulated with the Global Evaluation Plan for Portugal 2030 and with the Evaluation Plan for the ALGARVE 2030 Programme, and is aligned with the regulatory guidelines and the Technical Specifications.

The evaluation is based on the collection and analysis of a diverse set of information sources, including documentary and statistical analysis, data from the ALGARVE 2030 information systems, semi-structured interviews with 10 key entities, conducting surveys of business and non-business promoters, organisation of 6 thematic focus groups and development of a case study regarding the CTesP. The triangulation of these sources allows a robust reading of the Programme's operationalisation processes, ensuring the cross-validation of the evidence collected and the incorporation of the perceptions of the different actors involved in implementation.

The analysis is based on the mobilisation of Action Theory and Programming Theory, allowing us to deepen the intervention logic, the mechanisms of result production and the relationships between inputs, outputs and outcomes, in particular for a selected set of Operation Typologies. The analysis is structured around four Evaluation Questions and their Sub-Questions, organised according to the defined evaluation criteria. The main cut-off date for the evaluation is 31 December 2024, and is complemented, whenever relevant, by information updated on 30 June 2025, in order to support a more robust prospective assessment of the Programme's capacity to achieve its objectives and targets.

3. Conclusions

Coherence

ALGARVE 2030 presents a programmatic architecture consistent with European, national and regional guidelines, including RIS3 and territorial priorities. However, despite the planned complementarities (PRR, INTERREG, Horizon Europe, etc.), the operational articulation between instruments is still limited, leading to a significant dispersion of efforts and low integration between funds/instruments.

The PRR has become the preferred instrument for many promoters, given the 100% reimbursement and the lower administrative burden. In some areas of thematic overlap (water, energy, biodiversity, municipal equipment) it conditions the

pace of implementation of ALGARVE 2030, which is often pushed into the background by potential promoters (or whose potential investments are postponed).

The shortage of qualified human resources, administrative costs and procedural complexity weaken the ability of public entities to manage several programmes and instruments simultaneously (closure of Algarve 2020/PT2020, PRR and ALGARVE 2030). In this context, even when there is a potential for complementarity between instruments, the capacity to achieve this is limited.

There are strategic areas not incorporated in the eligibility of the Programme (rail mobility), which reduces the ability to complement the PRR and other available funds. In addition, for example in ITIs (namely ITI Water), financing conditions (40-60% reimbursement) and relatively stricter criteria exclude potential beneficiaries, reducing articulation with other instruments. Instrument concurrency creates real competition for technical, administrative, and market resources. More than thematic overlap, there is an inability to respond (manifested in the shortage of workforce capacity, in unsuccessful tenders, in increasing costs and in the saturation of municipal teams and the Programme's management structure itself). These factors, combined, are hindering the implementation of ALGARVE 2030 and weaken the potential for synergies with other instruments and funds.

Operational Efficiency

ALGARVE 2030 has shown an overall satisfactory capacity to mobilise demand: 67% of the calls (notices) attracted applications equal to, or above, the planned allocation, although with relevant variations between priorities. Priority 4A - Qualifications, employment and inclusion stands out, with levels of demand and qualified demand above the Programme average. The still low number of approvals is generally not due to the quality of applications, but rather to the high proportion of applications still under assessment. Difficulties faced by the Managing Authority (MA) and Intermediate Bodies (IBs) in conducting the merit assessment and decision-making processes are critical factors, strongly associated with limitations in the information systems (SGO and SI AG+) and the administrative burden resulting from the overlap between the closure of PT2020 and the management of the PRR.

These constraints were reflected in the failure to comply with the deadlines set out in the PT2030 Interministerial Coordination Committee (CIC PT2030) Notice Plans, despite the publication of four plans in less than a year. There were significant delays, in some cases up to seven months, and the non-publication of calls in strategic areas such as business R&D, Local Social Development Contracts (CLDS) and training in the health sector, impacting the pace of implementation and the expectations of beneficiaries.

The Programme's communication actions have contributed positively to the mobilisation of demand and to the improvement of the quality of applications, highlighting the clarification sessions, training initiatives and the concept of "academy". The ALGARVE 2030 website is also valued for the clarity of the information, although opportunities for improvement are identified, namely in strengthening the dissemination to business associations, in the guidance of intermediary entities and in improving the presentation and direction of content.

The Intermediate Bodies (IBs) also play an important role in mobilising demand and strengthening the quality of projects, through dissemination, training and close monitoring of promoters. Initiatives promoted by entities such as EMPIS, ANQEP and AICEP contribute to a greater alignment of projects with the needs of qualification, social inclusion and regional strategic objectives.

The eligibility conditions of the notices were considered appropriate and were generally not a deterrent to demand. However, competition with PRR instruments, which have more favourable financial conditions, penalised the relative attractiveness of the Programme to business entities. In addition, despite recent improvements, Information Systems continued to present functional limitations, with impacts on the efficiency of processes, partially mitigated by the effort of institutional articulation, although with high administrative costs.

The adoption of the OCS methodology brought advantages in simplification and procedural speed, increasing demand and focus on project results. However, this approach presents initial challenges, such as difficulties in interpreting notices and documents, especially for business promoters, and poor cost-appropriateness for non-business entity projects. To maximise the potential of SCOs, it is essential to strengthen capacity building and provide clear support materials.

Overall adequacy of the selection process, but with specific weaknesses that limit the maximisation of the contribution to the objectives of the Programme. The ALGARVE 2030 selection process demonstrates, overall, an adequate capacity to support operations with high contribution potential, evidenced by the low claim rate (1.2%) and the robustness of the admissibility and merit criteria applied. However, the analysis by strategic and specific objectives reveals relevant asymmetries, namely in the State Budget line "Lifelong learning and professional transitions", where the deviation rate reaches 5.5%, suggesting that the current admissibility criteria are not sufficiently discriminating against the real execution capacity of the promoters. This fact shows that, despite the overall effectiveness of the process, weaknesses remain that can compromise the prioritisation of operations with greater impact and maturity, especially in areas with a higher volume of applications.

The selection process is technically robust, based on formal control mechanisms and a comprehensive merit analysis (77% of the operations accepted), but it is affected by slow processing, procedural asymmetries and limitations in the governance model. A significant share of operations have been awaiting a decision for prolonged periods (42% between 91 and 180 days and 16% above 181 days), highlighting structural constraints that may compromise the timely implementation of operations with the greatest potential for impact. These delays result mainly from shortages of human resources, technical difficulties faced by promoters, limitations of information systems and a governance model with restricted delegation of competences, namely in ITIs, affecting the overall efficiency of the process.

The structure and weights of the selection criteria demonstrate high effectiveness in concentrating support on the operations with the highest potential. The architecture of the ALGARVE 2030 criteria is solid, coherent and multidimensional, combining strategic alignment, quality, execution capacity and impact. The distribution of the weights, with greater emphasis placed on Quality and Impact (30-50 points in Productive Business Investment and 30-40 points in the creation, expansion or modernisation of micro and small enterprises), favours more structured, innovative and transformative applications, ensuring the concentration of resources on projects with greater economic and social relevance. Hierarchisation by relative merit also reinforces selectivity in the context of budgetary constraints.

Despite the overall adequacy, some aspects reduce the effectiveness of the criteria as a prioritisation tool. In some typologies, such as CTeSP, too many criteria and the absence of clear prioritisation increase complexity, prolong analysis times and can introduce unequal treatment between applicants. In addition, the redistribution of scores in the absence of a history, although avoiding unfair penalties, can lead to distortions in the evaluation. These elements show that the full effectiveness of the criteria depends not only on their formal architecture, but also on simplification, calibration and the mitigation of subjectivity risks, strengthening the Programme's capacity to channel support to operations with greater transformative potential.

Effectiveness

The challenges to the start of the Algarve 2030, along with competition and overlap with other support instruments with more attractive financing rates and conditions, resulted in a low financial commitment, indicating potential difficulties with regard to the physical execution of the Programme: only 18% of the programmed allocation was approved and 12% executed, on 30 June 2025. These delays impacted analysis, contracting and payment deadlines, constraining operations, especially business, aggravated by external factors such as the availability of labour in the market, the construction market and other context costs.

Most promoters (business and non-business) reveal an optimistic position regarding the fulfilment of the defined goals, given that the vast majority expect to reach or even exceed the contracted values. However, compliance with the contracted indicators does not directly translate into the achievement of the goals stipulated for Algarve 2030, and prospects for their fulfilment, at this stage of programming, vary between Specific Objectives.

The Specific Objectives funded by the ERDF have very heterogeneous levels of contracting: some, such as the promotion of R&I (RSO1.1) and sustainable water management (RSO2.5), have high rates, but almost zero financial execution, requiring caution in the prospects of compliance; others, such as education (RSO4.2), culture and tourism (RSO4.6) and territorial development (RSO5.2), register moderate rates and may require reprogramming. Areas such as circular economy, biodiversity, urban mobility (RSO2.6, RSO2.7, RSO2.8) and SME competitiveness (RSO1.3) have very low rates, associated with delays in notices, low demand and market constraints, aggravating risks of non-compliance. In the ESF+, support for employment (ESO4.1) and learning (ESO4.7) shows moderate implementation, while adaptation to change (ESO4.4) and active inclusion (ESO4.8) are well below targets, with additional challenges in health due to the absence of approved operations.

Considering the Programme's operationalisation chain (mobilisation → approval → execution), the evidence as of 30 June 2025 reveals an upstream bottleneck: the Programme was far from mobilising the necessary number and profile of operations, with a commitment rate of around 19% and a pipeline still insufficient to drive subsequent execution. Competition from the PRR, difficulties in the transition between programming periods marked by the pandemic crisis and entry barriers to specific typologies (e.g., minimums in energy efficiency) limited the conversion of demand into approvals in the most investment- and licensing-intensive State Budgets; downstream, operational and market barriers persisted that slowed down the implementation of projects.

Although the assessment was cut off on 30 June 2025, the most recent data show a very significant acceleration of commitment, reflecting greater mobilisation and maturity of the pipeline: 38.4% overall, with 34.0% in the ERDF and 64.7% in the ESF+. However, implementation remains modest compared to the new scale of approvals: 9.0% overall (7.5% ERDF; 18.0% ESF+), maintaining the "approved → executed" gap, especially in physical investments. Compared to Portugal 2030 (52.2% approval; 15.9% implementation), Algarve remains below the national average in these global metrics; even so, it stands out in the ESF+ compared to the other regional programmes, contrasting with lower performance in the ERDF, in line with the greater maturity of the social domains and the contractual technical requirements of CAPEX investments in the region.

The delays in the implementation of ALGARVE 2030, combined with other internal and external factors, were negatively reflected in the Operation Typologies with approved projects, which have significantly reduced levels of financial execution at the cut-off date, with impacts on the achievement of the defined goals. In productive business investment, despite the alignment of the contracted indicators with the logic of innovation and business diversification, the levels of execution are zero (0%), preventing the assessment of compliance with the intermediate results. Contracting favours relevant metrics such as innovation and productivity, although it includes some less relevant indicators in this area (such as GHG emissions). The only goal already contracted exceeds the programmed objective for job creation, signalling the potential for fulfilment if the projects advance as planned; however, risks remain associated with delays, labour shortages and high costs.

The projects for the creation, expansion or modernisation of micro and small enterprises (SI) have an intervention logic consistent with the objectives of the Programme, aimed at strengthening the competitiveness and modernisation of the business sector. Even so, financial execution is low (16%), making it premature to assess the achievement of intermediate results. The contracted indicators are partially aligned with the Programming Theory, especially in terms of results, but show weaker alignment with expected achievements; delays in contracting and external constraints may also condition the effectiveness of the support.

CTeSP is the typology closest to achieving the intermediate objectives, with an achievement rate of 45% and indicators aligned with strengthening employability and access to higher education. These courses contribute to reducing skills asymmetries and to aligning training provision with the needs of the regional labour market, reinforcing articulation between higher education institutions and the business community. Even so, weaknesses persist in the contracted indicators, which could be clearer and incorporate metrics related to integration into the labour market or academic progression. Implementation also faces challenges, such as difficulties in hiring teachers and relevant dropout rates; nevertheless, this typology remains strategically important for promoting professional progression and qualification pathways.

In the field of partnerships for social innovation, despite the conceptual alignment with the objectives of inclusion and reduction of social vulnerabilities, financial execution is practically non-existent (1%), compromising the achievement of intermediate results. The contracted indicators have limitations, with metrics that are not very specific and difficult to measure, which do not fully reflect the expected impacts. Although the promoters recognize relevant contributions to social goals, such as the reduction of school failure and the promotion of inclusion, the contracting favors aggregate commitments, with poor granularity for the evaluation of structural changes, making it difficult to monitor the effectiveness and impact of operations.

From a global perspective, the analysis of the Operation Typologies with approved projects shows that, despite the general adequacy of the indicators in terms of specificity and measurability, there are still limitations in terms of tangibility and temporality. The absence of intermediate targets and ambiguities in the formulation of some indicators make it difficult to progressively monitor implementation and increase the risk of concentration at the end of the period. In addition, contracting privileges direct results, such as job creation or course completion, to the detriment of metrics that capture structural changes, such as sustainable integration into the labour market, digital transformation, or effective social inclusion, limiting the evaluation of the Programme's aggregate impact.

4. Recommendations

Accelerate the analysis and decision-making on applications:

- Reinforce technical teams with temporary hiring or internal mobilisation, ensuring specialisation by project type;
- Implement simplified procedures, eliminating descriptions that are already contained in attached documents, standardising evaluation grids and adopting technical opinions based on objective checklists.

Mechanisms for alerting and complying with the n+3 rule and accelerating financial execution:

- Create an advanced predictive dashboard, integrated into the Information System, which transforms the data from the monthly bulletin into prospective alerts. This dashboard should include algorithms to anticipate risks, flag critical operations, and propose specific corrective measures by priority;
- Promote (regular) close monitoring of critical operations;
- Identify the projects with the greatest impact on compliance with the n+3 rule, based on typology, speed of execution and financial value, prioritising corrective actions in these cases;
- Monitor priority operations monthly, with automatic reports that include proposals for mid-term reprogramming and redistribution of funds;
- Establish a system of specific risk indicators for 2027-2028, using financial data from the monthly bulletin to compare current trajectories with those needed, allowing for immediate adjustments;
- Develop contingency scenarios, automatically activated when monthly projections indicate a risk of more than 15% of non-compliance, ensuring a quick and effective response;
- Define automatic reprogramming mechanisms, triggered when the predictive analysis identifies divergences of more than 20% from the n+3 targets in any priority.

Adjust reimbursement rules and reduce barriers to access in critical areas:

- Simplifying eligibility criteria and reducing aggregation requirements where they drive out relevant promoters;
- Assess the feasibility of implementing territorial increases for more vulnerable areas or areas with lower installed technical capacities.
- Identify complementary funding opportunities for the CPN in line with practices already implemented by the MA, for example through the Fundo Ambiental or Turismo de Portugal support lines, including via the State Budget.

Adjust the schedule and calendar of notices to the real response capacity of the market and municipalities:

- Avoid overlapping with the critical (final) phase of implementation of the PRR, especially in sectors with high pressure (civil construction, water infrastructure,...);
- Consider planning phased notices, with sequential opening by typology, to distribute the administrative burden and reduce the likelihood of unsuccessful tenders;
- Incorporate mechanisms for pre-assessing project maturity to improve predictability and reduce dropouts.

Strengthen the formal coordination mechanisms between instruments (PT2030, sectoral funds, PRR):

- Use CCDR Algarve's advisory bodies to monitor any overlaps, align call schedules and monitor implementation/enforcement goals;
- Share information in advance on typologies, eligibility and funding windows, avoiding simultaneous "peaks" that overload municipalities and the market;
- Produce joint guidelines that clarify complementarities and boundaries between ALGARVE 2030 and other instruments, reducing uncertainty among beneficiaries.

Strengthen the operational articulation of the ITI (AMAL and Water) with other funds and territorial structures:

- In the case of ITI AMAL - define and operationalise a coordination plan with the PRR management structures to ensure that complementary investments do not stall due to a lack of technical capacity;
- In the case of ITI Water - strengthen the involvement of ADL to mobilise small promoters;
- Create quarterly multi-level governance meetings between AMAL, the MA and sectoral entities to monitor redundancy or competition risks.

Strengthen governance and inter-institutional articulation:

- Decentralise competences and make IBs more autonomous, reducing administrative pressure on the MA, for example by returning responsibility for making payments/advances to IBs without MA validation;
- Institutionalise adaptive learning through: (i) creation of a database of lessons learned and shared good practices; (ii) monthly meetings between the MA and IB teams; and (iii) development of an early warning system to identify emerging constraints before they become systemic problems.

Strengthen capacity building and communication with beneficiaries:

- Continue to invest in traditional communication tools: online website, social networks, electronic newsletter, social media and public events/sessions;
- Promote more segmented sessions (companies, IPSS, municipalities), regular webinars and initiatives in "academy" format for direct clarification and training of promoters (before and after the launch of certain notices, depending on their importance/specificities);
- Provide an online questionnaire with quick guidance to refer promoters and assist in choosing appropriate support;
- Create online simulators, for calculating eligibility and funding, with immediate results;
- Establish strategic partnerships with business associations, professional associations and sectoral confederations to amplify communication and identification of potential beneficiaries;
- Strengthen the role of IBs in communication, dissemination and capacity building, both for beneficiaries and final recipients;
- Produce simple comparative maps between ALGARVE 2030, the PRR and the Fundo Ambiental (rates, eligibility, deadlines), to reduce confusion and facilitate informed choices;

Modernising information systems and simplifying administrative procedures:

- Produce practical guides and manuals with real examples and accessible language, covering all phases of the operation;
- Expand FAQ and provide tutorial videos for recurring questions, with continuous updating;
- Carry out an evaluation of the application forms to eliminate redundant fields, implement auto-completion based on previous applications and the correction of the technical limitations of the platform;
- Ensure interoperability between information systems, avoiding data duplication and inconsistencies;
- Continue to train the technical teams of the Funds Helpdesk (Linha dos Fundos), promoting clarification/training sessions and providing support materials.

Strengthening technical expertise:

- Define a structured recruitment plan, prioritising specialised technical profiles in areas of greater complexity (research, environment, transport), or establish effective articulation mechanisms between government departments to address shortages;
- Implement a continuous training program, aimed at beneficiary entities and technicians of the management structures, with a focus on management of European funds, strategic planning and monitoring;
- Establish formal partnerships with academic institutions, such as universities and research centres, for advanced training of specialists in European funds and development of specific technical skills;
- Create talent retention mechanisms, including incentives for professional progression and attractive conditions to avoid high turnover;
- Integrate practical modules and recognized certifications, ensuring that technicians acquire applicable skills aligned with European standards.
- Expand the staff of specialized human resources allocated to the management of the Programme, given the high volume of applications subject to merit analysis and the extended deadlines for decision in the selection phase;

Strengthen the selectivity and efficiency of the selection process by increasing the operational capacity of the management, ensuring a more differentiating evaluation and a faster processing of applications:

- Mobilise additional temporary human resources (internal or external) for State Budget operations with a higher volume of applications and slower processing times;
- Create specialized teams by type of operation, reducing learning times and increasing the quality and speed of analysis;
- Invest in the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in information systems whenever possible, especially in the merit analysis phase of applications. This option will allow for greater procedural agility, rigor of analysis, reduction of the risk of subjectivity, namely, in a framework marked by constraints in terms of the allocation of human resources;
- Introduce automations for document pre-validation and simple eligibility verification, freeing up analytical capacity for the substantive evaluation of applications;
- Incorporate a "risk of failure" mechanism based on early indicators, which allows for more prudent decisions and reinforced follow-ups;
- Create targeted training sessions for promoters with a higher incidence of errors or technical shortcomings.

Adjust and simplify the selection criteria matrix, reinforcing its fairness, efficiency and ability to identify high-impact operations:

- Continue to simplify, as much as possible, the selection criteria in some OTs, namely in the "Higher Professional Technical Courses" (CTeSP), in order to shorten analysis times and promote greater objectivity in the selection of operations;
- Reduce the number of redundant criteria and sub-criteria, especially in the "Quality" category, concentrating them on key dimensions that clearly reflect the impact and relevance of the operation;
- Introduce a maximum limit of sub-criteria per category, ensuring a greater balance between OTs and avoiding inequalities between entities with different technical capacities;
- Adjust weights in order to prevent criteria with less differentiating power from excessively influencing the final result. For OTs focused on economic impact and innovation, reinforce the weight of the criteria of impact and structural transformation. In the case of social OTs, reinforce the weight of criteria related to social relevance, community outreach and post-project sustainability;
- Improve the combination of evaluation criteria in the Project Merit (PM) formula, reinforcing the robustness and adequacy of the application selection process, in order to ensure a growing concentration of support on operations with the greatest potential in relation to the objectives of the Programme;
- Review the scoring redistribution mechanism in the absence of history, namely by creating limits on redistribution to prevent operations with structural weaknesses from being artificially valued and considering the creation of an alternative criterion "potential for future implementation";
- Reinforce criteria that test the promoters' real execution capacity (execution history, financial capacity, available technical team, project maturity).

Improve system indicators and monitoring:

- Create a system of complementary indicators, based on the Regional Statistical System, to capture structural changes in the economy and society, going beyond the direct results of individual projects;
- Introduce realistic intermediate targets, allowing adjustments during execution and timely correction;
- Implement an automatic alert system, triggered for deviations greater than 15% of the contracted targets, activating technical support mechanisms and possible revision of objectives;
- Define clear and progressive consequences for systematic non-compliance, balancing a guiding function with realism in the face of external constraints;
- Promote harmonisation between community and regional indicators, ensuring adequacy to territorial specificities and coherence with European standards;
- Concentrate the monitoring system on a reduced set of indicators, clearer and more relevant, which allow for the effective evaluation of the achievements and results of the Algarve 2030.
- Integrate digital systems for data collection and analysis, with interactive dashboards and automatic reports for managers and beneficiaries.

