

# ESF AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

THE USE OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF) DURING 2014-2020  
FOR COMBATING POVERTY AND ACHIEVING SOCIAL INCLUSION

by Fintan Farrell



## Acknowledgements

ESF and the Fight against Poverty: The use of the European Social Fund (ESF) during 2014 – 2020 for combating poverty and achieving social inclusion.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AMIF</b>	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
<b>AROEPE</b>	At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion
<b>CF</b>	Cohesion Fund
<b>CLLD</b>	Community-Led Local Development
<b>CPR</b>	Common Provisions Regulation (for European Structural and Investment Funds)
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organisations
<b>CSR</b>	Country Specific Recommendation (under the EU Semester process)
<b>EAC</b>	Ex-ante conditionality
<b>EFSI</b>	European Fund for Strategic Investments
<b>EPSR</b>	European Pillar of Social Rights
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ESF+</b>	European Social Fund Plus (2021-2027)
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>FEAD</b>	Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
<b>GUE/NGL</b>	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
<b>IP</b>	Investment Priority
<b>ITI</b>	Integrated Territorial Investment
<b>MC</b>	Monitoring Committee (for the ESF)
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NRRP</b>	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
<b>OP</b>	Operational Programme
<b>PA</b>	Partnership Agreement
<b>TO</b>	Thematic Objective

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [Regulation for the European Social Fund \(ESF\) 2014-2020](#) stipulated in Article 4.2 that, “At least 20% of the total ESF resources in each Member State shall be allocated to the Thematic Objective no. 9 ‘promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination’. This article in the regulation responded to the historical decision of establishing a poverty target (reduce poverty by at least 20 million people by 2020) in the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#). These developments set a positive context for an increased use of ESF for combating poverty and achieving greater social inclusion during the 2014–2020 period. The European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group in the European Parliament commissioned independent research to conduct this study and report, to see to what extent the potential from this positive context was realised.

The Investment Priorities linked to TO9 were as follows:

- 1) “Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability”,
- 2) “Socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as the Roma” and
- 3) “Enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality services, including health care and social services of general interest”.

Among the broad Investment Priorities linked to the Thematic Objective 9, the focus of this Report is on combating poverty. While there is a huge overlap between groups experiencing social exclusion and/or discrimination and those experiencing poverty, in so far as possible, this report seeks to focus on the use of the ESF for programmes and actions that have a clear focus on combating poverty in terms of: clearly targeted at groups and communities in or at risk of poverty and exclusion, clearly aimed at reducing income poverty, increasing access of people in poverty to essential services, facilitating their inclusion in employment through quality jobs, and/or their active participation in policy making that impacts on their lives and in society more generally.

The aim of the report is to draw lessons from the experience of the 2014-2020 period that can strengthen the use of ESF+ funds for combating poverty, under the provision in the [ESF+ funds \(2021-2027\) Regulation](#), which stipulates that at least 25% of the funds must be invested in the ‘social inclusion policy area’.

Chapter one sets out the background to the report, the aims and objectives, the key elements from the ESF (2014-2020) Regulation and the methodology used to prepare the report. Chapter two presents a review of studies carried out by EU institutions (including studies commissioned by them) and from EU level NGOs. Links to the Studies and Reports mentioned can be found in annex 1. Chapter three highlights the experience in 7 countries in relation to the use of ESF in, Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain. This includes a general overview of the use of ESF for social inclusion, the identification and impact of key elements from the revised Regulation for the 2014-2020 period from the point of view of stakeholders, the practice in relation to combating poverty, including practice examples, the Involvement of Anti-Poverty NGOs and identifying the challenges for the ESF+ period based on the experience of the 2014-2020 period.

Chapter four identifies the following, **12 Key Findings which can influence the implementation of ESF+**

1. Given the size of the ESF investment, the potential and needed links to National Funds and other EU Funds, it is not possible to present in a short report a comprehensive overview and assessment of the impact of ESF investments had on combating poverty, for the period 2014-2020. However, this cannot be allowed to prevent the effort to highlight key issues and learnings from the use of ESF in this period.
2. There is a great variation in the efforts made in the different countries to focus investments under ESF for combating poverty. While some progress was made in linking ESF investments to the implementation of integrated anti-poverty strategies and policy frameworks the full potential of this approach was far from realised. In almost all countries there is a need for much greater efforts to focus ESF investments on people experiencing poverty. However, there is evidence of the wider use of the funds in this period to go beyond labour market activation measures and address poverty and social exclusion in a more holistic way (access to essential goods and services, fostering participation in the world of work and in society) as allowed under the Regulation. There is also evidence that children and older people were better included in this round. There are examples of labour market activation that included a more holistic approach and focused on the quality of the employment. There is also evidence that ESF makes an important contribution to combating poverty.
3. The ex-ante conditionality to link ESF investments for combating poverty, fostering inclusion, and tackling discrimination to National and Regional Strategies and Policy Frameworks has been a positive development and helps to identify the added value from ESF investments.
4. The focus on poverty can get lost within the broad framing of Thematic Objective 9 and the linked Investment Priorities in the ESF Regulation.
5. The full potential within the ESF Regulation (2014-2016) for a more holistic approach to combating poverty has not been fully utilised.
6. An empowerment and capabilities approach to underpin ESF investments to combat poverty is underdeveloped.
7. Access to ESF by social and anti-poverty NGOs, in the framework of the calls in the field of social inclusion and combating poverty, is still very limited in most countries.
8. Ensuring the sustainability of successful actions and projects supported by ESF and upscaling and mainstreaming these projects, continues to be a key challenge.
9. Partnership, as reflected in the Partnership Principle in the ESF Regulation, is essential for successful actions to combat poverty. Attention needs to shift now from formal compliance to investment in the quality of the partnerships and building the capacities of all the relevant partners.
10. While progress has been made on simplification and reducing the administrative burden in relation to implementing ESF, further improvements are needed.
11. Communication, transparency, and mutual learning can be further developed to ensure more knowledge is available, that the impact ESF investments have on combating poverty is better known, and to increase public confidence that the funds are properly used.
12. More ambition and urgency in relation to combating poverty, learning the lessons from the multiple crises of the past years, and recognising that there will be no successful green or digital transition without greater social cohesion is vital to build a sustainable future.



Chapter five presents the key elements in relation to combating poverty from the ESF+ Regulation. A key change is the shift in the way the focus on social inclusion is described. There is a change in wording from the 20% earmarked for 'promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination' in the current regulation, to the wording, 25% ringfenced for 'social inclusion policy area', under the ESF+ Regulation, and from the 3 investment priorities of 2014-2020 to the following five specific objectives for the 2021-2027 period:

1. Fostering active inclusion with a view to promoting equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability, in particular for disadvantaged groups.
2. Promoting socio-economic integration of third-country nationals, including migrants.
3. Promoting the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people.
4. Enhancing equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, including services that promote the access to housing and person-centred care including healthcare; modernising social protection systems, including promoting access to social protection, with a particular focus on children and disadvantaged groups; improving accessibility including for persons with disabilities, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services.
5. Promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children.

The final chapter presents the recommendations for the implementation of ESF+. To derive lessons from the 2014-2020 ESF period and transform them to recommendations for the implementation of the ESF+ 2021-2027 will require the collective reflection of the many key actors necessary for the successful use of ESF+ investments to combat poverty. The recommendations that follow are based on the findings from this study and are offered in the hope that they can contribute ideas for that reflection.

## Recommendations to the European Commission

1. To ensure a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives identified for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policy.
2. To ensure consistent guidance for the implementation of the ESF+ that encourages the holistic and integrated response to combating poverty that is possible under the ESF+ Regulation.
3. To carefully monitor the development and the quality of the national strategies and policy frameworks that are required as part of the enabling conditions.
4. To continue to ensure the added value of ESF+ funding.
5. To ensure the focus on people experiencing severe deprivation remains within the delivery of the FEAD under the ESF+ Regulation.
6. To maintain a strong focus on combating poverty within the transnational exchange forums in the 2021-2027 period.
7. To promote the use of ESF+ to support an empowerment and capabilities approach to combating poverty and ensuring social inclusion.
8. To monitor and document more fully the operation of the partnership principle to support the move from formal compliance to more meaningful engagement.
9. To further develop the work on simplification.
10. To promote greater transparency and more accessible communication.
11. To track the use of ESF+ investments for the support they give to ensuring delivery on all the principles in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which will be an essential contribution to a Europe capable of eradicating poverty.
12. To ensure that the EU Semester process is used to monitor and support the follow up of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the three headline targets on employment, skills, and social protection, identified in the action plan, including the EU 2030 poverty target, 'The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, out of them, at least 5 million should be children'.

## Recommendations to the European Parliament and the Political Groups in the European Parliament

1. To ensure that the reporting on the implementation of the ESF+ by the European Commission includes a focus on combating poverty and the contribution ESF+ investments are making to achieving the EU 2030 Poverty Target.
2. To arrange hearings in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs to inform and analyse the effectiveness of efforts to make progress in combating poverty through the ESF+ investments and to monitor the implementation of partnership in the monitoring and delivery of ESF+.
3. To ensure an annual hearing in the Budgetary Control Committee to discuss implementation of ESF+ including investments to combat poverty.
4. To ensure that ESF+ funds are used to support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.
5. To ensure that the relevant intergroups addressing issues such as, poverty, anti-corruption, anti-racism and diversity, children's rights, climate change, disability, rural and urban areas, digitalisation, and social economy, draw attention to the role and use of ESF+ for combating poverty.
6. To ensure that the political groups create spaces to discuss key aspects of how ESF+ is used for combating poverty.
7. To monitor follow up of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), including the EU 2030 poverty target identified in the action plan to follow up the EPSR, and monitor that ESF+ investments are used to support the implementation of all the principles in the EPSR.
8. To build the widest possible political consensus on the need for more ambitious and urgent action for combating poverty and the recognition that there will be no successful green and digital transition without greater social cohesion.

## Recommendations to Member States

1. To ensure a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives identified for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policy.
2. To ensure ESF+ investments are linked to, national, regional, and local, strategies and policy frameworks and international commitments and to ensure the added value of ESF+ funding.
3. To ensure in the implementation of the ESF+ that the holistic and integrated response to combating poverty that is possible under the ESF+ Regulation is fully utilised.
4. To ensure the focus on people experiencing severe deprivation remains within the delivery of the FEAD under the ESF+ Regulation.
5. To promote and invest in exchange and learning at regional, national, and trans-national levels.
6. To create the conditions to use ESF+ investments to support an empowerment and capabilities approach to combating poverty and ensuring social inclusion.
7. To invest in the development and strengthening of partnership, including the engagement of social and anti-poverty NGOs, as an essential element to effectively use ESF+ funding and to ensure the engagement of all relevant Ministries:
8. To invest further in simplification and make ESF funds more accessible to social and anti-poverty NGOs.
9. To ensure greater transparency in the monitoring, delivery, and evaluation of ESF+ investments.
10. To invest in the necessary personnel to deliver the ESF+ programme and to invest in developing their capacities to take on this challenging task.

## **Recommendations to the Council of the EU**

1. Promote exchange and learning from the use of ESF+ for combating poverty and the contribution ESF+ investments make to reaching the EU 2030 Poverty Target.
2. Ensure a strong involvement of key Council formations in the follow up of the ESF+.
3. Ensure as part of the follow up of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), regular social summits, which includes space to reflect on how ESF+ is used to implement the agreed Principles of the EPSR.

## **Recommendations to Social and Anti-Poverty NGOs**

1. To allocate time and resources to engaging at a broad political level to influence the use of ESF+ for combating poverty
2. To take a 'watchdog role' to ensure combating poverty is a clear objective of investments under the ESF+.
3. To seek to be active partners positively engaged in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ESF+.
4. To seek to receive directly ESF+ funds and to take on the responsibilities of delivering projects and actions under the ESF+.
5. To be champions of an empowerment and capacity building approach with the active participation of people experiencing poverty.
6. To actively campaign for more ambitious and urgent EU responses to combating poverty, for greater equality, and to ensure a strong link between actions to address the climate and ecological crisis and actions for combating poverty, including investments under ESF+.



# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

The [Regulation for the European Social Fund \(ESF\) 2014-2020](#) stipulates in Article 4.2 that, “At least 20% of the total ESF resources in each Member State shall be allocated to the Thematic Objective no. 9 (TO9) “promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination”. This article in the regulation responded to the historical decision of establishing a poverty target (reduce poverty by at least 20 million people by 2020) in the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#). In addition, some Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) as part of the [European Semester](#) that followed up the 2020 Strategy included recommendations in relation to combating poverty. In some Member States, these CSRs were very important in paving the way to the introduction of important national measures aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion, which have sometimes been combined with the use of the ESF and other EU funds.

These developments set a positive context for an increased use of ESF for combating poverty and achieving greater social inclusion during the 2014–2020 period. The Left in the European Parliament commissioned independent research to prepare this report, to see to what extent the potential from this positive context was realised.

Among the broad Investment Priorities linked to TO9, the focus of this Report is on poverty reduction and active inclusion. While there is a huge overlap between groups experiencing social exclusion and/or discrimination and those experiencing poverty, in so far as possible, the report seeks to focus on the use of the ESF for programmes and actions that have a clear focus on combating poverty in terms of: clearly targeted at groups and communities in or at risk of poverty and exclusion, clearly aimed at reducing income poverty, increasing access of people in poverty to essential services, facilitating their inclusion in employment through quality jobs, and/or their active participation in policy making that impacts on their lives and in society more generally.

This Report does not try to cover the support offered under the [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#) which supports EU countries’ actions to provide food and/or basic material assistance and accompanying social inclusion measures to people experiencing deprivation in Europe. In the 2014-2020 period, FEAD had its own specific regulation. For the period 2021-2027 FEAD is integrated in the [European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\)](#) Regulation.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the report is to draw lessons from the experience of the 2014-2020 period that can strengthen the use of [ESF+](#) funds for combating poverty, under the provision in the [ESF+ \(2021-2027\) Regulation](#), which stipulates that at least 25% of the funds must be invested in the ‘social inclusion policy area’.

The objectives of the Report are:

- To develop a clearer picture, from a qualitative point of view, of how the ESF (2014-2020) was implemented to reduce/eradicate poverty
- To hear the voice of those organisations, communities and individuals directly concerned with combating poverty
- To identify interesting practices
- To identify key lessons from the 2014-2020 programming period and suggest recommendations in view of ESF+ programming and implementation

## THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF) 2014-2020 REGULATION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

In addition to the key elements of the regulation mentioned above, the earmarking of 20% of ESF funding in each country for promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination (TO9), it would be important to recognise that the [Guidance](#)

on [Ex ante Conditionalities for the European Structural and Investment Funds](#) identifies three Investment Priorities (IPs) for TO9:

- 1) "Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability",
- 2) "Socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as the Roma" and
- 3) "Enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality services, including health care and social services of general interest".

It would also be important to highlight that the ex-ante conditionality required that:

*"A national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction, aiming at active inclusion, is in place that:*

- provides a sufficient evidence base to develop policies for poverty reduction and monitor developments.
- contains measures supporting the achievement of the national poverty and social exclusion target (as defined in the National Reform Programme), which includes the promotion of sustainable and quality employment opportunities for people at the highest risk of social exclusion, including people from marginalised communities.
- involves relevant stakeholders in combating poverty.
- depending on the identified needs, includes measures for the shift from institutional to community-based care.
- Upon request and where justified, relevant stakeholders will be provided with support for submitting project applications and for implementing and managing the selected projects."

Another relevant part of the regulatory framework for ESF (2014-2020) was that Article 5 of the [Common Provision Regulation \(CPR\)](#) for the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for the same period, makes it compulsory for each programme to organise a partnership at all programming stages and at all governance levels. Involvement of partners is also laid down in Article 6 of the ESF Regulation. A

[European Code of Conduct on Partnership \(CoC\)](#) was set up to support Member States to ensure that all partners are involved, at all stages, in the implementation of Partnership Agreements (PAs) and Operational Programmes (OPs). This partnership principle should strengthen the involvement and influence of all stakeholders, including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), including those engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion, in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ESF.

The thematic objective 9, the investment priorities, ex-ante conditionality requirements, and the partnership principle, created the framework for the use of ESF in this period for the combating poverty.

## METHODOLOGY USED TO PREPARE THE REPORT

The methodology for writing this report included:

**A Literature Review:** identifying and writing up summaries of key information from relevant EU level literature both from the EU institutions (including studies commissioned by the EU institutions) and EU-level NGOs, to give a general overview across all Member States on the use of ESF in this period for combating poverty. For a link to the reports mentioned in this section of the report, see annex 1.

**Desk Research:** for each of the countries highlighted in this Report, analysing the sections of the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes, highlighting investments to meet the social inclusion objective (TO9), in particular those related to combating poverty. General information on the ESF and the Operational Programmes focusing on TO9 is mainly drawn from the [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu) website, section on [ESF Operational Programmes](#).

**Semi Structured Interviews:** for each Member State analysed, interviews were sought from the following categories: the relevant country desk officials in the European Commission, representatives of Managing Authorities and Implementing Bodies for the ESF in the 2014-2021 period, representatives of anti-poverty Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other NGOs engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion, representatives of beneficiaries<sup>1</sup> of ESF. For the questions used for these semi-structured interviews see annex 2. For the list of people and organisations interviewed, or who provided written

<sup>1</sup> Under the Regulation 'beneficiary' means: (a) a public or private body, an entity with or without legal personality, or a natural person, responsible for initiating or both initiating and implementing operations;

inputs, see annex 3. It is important to note that the views expressed are personal perspectives and may not fully reflect the views of the organisation or institution of the interviewee.

**Closed Questionnaire:** a closed question questionnaire was distributed to a list of approximately 250 contacts (Managing Authorities, Implementing Bodies, and Stakeholders), both at EU level and in the 27 Member States, to allow a chance for general reactions from different actors. 23 questionnaires were returned (annex 4 provides the questionnaire, while annex 5 contains an analysis of the responses). The information gathered from the countries highlighted in this Report was integrated into the relevant country fiches.

**Highlighting the experience in some Member States:** given the limit of time and resources available for the work on the Report, the following 7 Member States were analysed: Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal and Spain. Country fiches are presented for each of these countries which seek to give a picture of how concretely ESF funds have been used for combating poverty and to identify interesting practices that could bring lessons for strengthening the use of ESF to fight poverty in the future. It was intended to provide additional country fiches, but the number of interviews or information gathered was not sufficient to provide the necessary different perspectives. The countries chosen were based on ensuring a good geographical spread and were also countries where the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group has MEPs present. The draft country fiches were sent to all those interviewed in that country for corrections and comments. The author of the report then finalised the country fiches taking account, as appropriate, of the comments received.

**Key Findings and Recommendations:** Based on the information gathered, the author of the Report identified key findings from the experience of this period and drafted recommendations for the coming ESF+ period (2021-2027).

**Limitations of this research:** It is important to highlight some of the limitations that affected the conduct of this research and have necessarily had an impact on the findings from this work. This Report is based on the views expressed by the respondents and the interviewees, which were collected in a relatively short time frame. Not all the actors that were invited to give an interview responded, and responses were not achieved from all the categories identified to be included. The reasons for this can include:

- the relatively short timeframe, limited human resources, interview fatigue
- the complexity of the topic and the difficulties in distinguishing ESF aimed at combating poverty as distinct from broader social inclusion and anti-discrimination objectives might have caused difficulties for some public officials to express views that might not fully reflect the views of the institution for which they work
- the practical difficulties to identify the right person responsible for the implementation of the relevant OPs that was able to respond at a time when prioritisation needed to be given to the programming for the next ESF+ period, or more other urgent priorities
- requests to functional emails often went unanswered
- sequencing of interviews, sometimes interviews were sought that would give a general overview first before approaching other actors. If there were delays in getting the general overview, then requests to other actors went late and some were then not able to respond within the time frame.
- many relevant European level NGOs were reluctant to pass on the interview questionnaire, or to facilitate contacts, to their national members, due to survey fatigue, especially at a time when their members are additionally burdened responding to the needs arising due to Covid-19.

In the large countries that have a complex governance structure for the ESF, foreseeing both National Operational Programmes and regional Operational Programmes, the author focused on the most relevant OPs. In some countries the focus on anti-poverty measures was in the national OPs, while in other countries it was in the regional OPs. The report reflects this.

A thorough analysis of the use of ESF to combat poverty requires more time and resources. However, this Report does give a picture of the reality in this period and does offer important insights into the experience of the use of the funds to combat poverty that allows reflections on which to draw lessons for future practice and policies.





# LITERATURE REVIEW - ESF AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

For this study, a review of EU level literature, both from the EU institutions (including studies commissioned by them) and from EU level NGOs was carried out. Literature about the use of the ESF to combat poverty in the 2014-2020 is scarce. The few studies that are available cover the whole TO9, often without spelling out the specific investment priorities, sometimes together with TO8 (employment) and TO10 (education and training). Links to the Studies and Reports mentioned can be found in annex 1.

## REPORTS BY AND STUDIES COMMISSIONED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The most important source reviewed is the 2021 European Commission's '**evaluation of the use of the 2014-2018 ESF support to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education and training**'. It presents the main findings and lessons learned from three thematic evaluation studies on the ESF support: the evaluation of ESF support to (i) employment and labour mobility (TO8, excluding youth employment), (ii) social inclusion (TO9), and (iii) education and training (TO10) from 2014 up to the end of 2018.

This report states that TO9 operations are financed by 145 operational programs covering all Member States (MS) and regions. They account for a total planned expenditure (including EU and national co-financing) of approximately EUR 31.3 billion (of which EUR 21.4 billion EU funding). This corresponds to about one quarter of total ESF funding, which is more than the required earmarking. Looking at investment priorities, around 73% (EUR 22.1 billion) is allocated to 9i (active inclusion). The next most important investment priority in terms of indicative allocation is 9iv (access to services) at 17% (EUR 4.8 billion). The remaining investment priorities represent between 1% and 6% of total funding allocated to TO9. A similar picture emerges at MS level. Generally, the bulk of the allocations is to 9i (active inclusion). In eleven MS (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, France, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland, Sweden and

United Kingdom), 9i even amounts to 90% or more of the total TO9 investments. Only eight MS allocate the biggest share of the total to a priority other than 9i (9ii – Hungary; 9iii – Cyprus; 9iv – Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, and Romania).

The supporting study on social inclusion identifies six types of operations on the basis of the objective actually pursued and the target groups aimed at. Four types of operations encompass actions directed to people, while the two remaining types comprise actions directed to organisations or society at large (e.g. capacity building of social services, support to social enterprises, information campaigns).

Concerning participants' profiles, the highest proportions are people with a disability, people with a migrant background or minorities and people with other disadvantages were recorded for TO9 (social inclusion). The employment-focused operations under TO9 received the bulk of the available financing and had the highest success rates (calculated as the proportion of participants for whom positive results were recorded).

The report argues that ESF support to social inclusion has contributed to progress made towards achieving the Europe 2020 target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty. Although the extent to which TO9 operations contributed to this progress cannot be directly assessed, evidence on the scale and type of results generated by ESF support to TO9 suggests that the contribution was positive. In total, more than 3 million positive results were reported in terms of engagement in job search, participation in education and training and accessing employment including self-employment. In terms of engagement in employment, the most successful operations were Type 1 (employment-focused actions). In addition to reflecting a high degree of effectiveness, these achievements may also indicate some degree of 'creaming' effects whereby participants in these operations were very close to the labour market from the start.

On the other hand, although the proportion of recorded results for enhanced basic skills and basic school (Types 2 and 3 operations) was low, their perceived effectiveness is high. A high proportion of respondents to the public consultation noted that basic skills training (90%) and training and education (89%) were mostly useful or very useful in the promotion of social inclusion and in combating poverty and discrimination. Respondents also perceived the effectiveness of support to overcoming barriers to job search actions as high (85%).

The evaluation identified a number of areas including individual behaviour and social roles where ESF actions may have induced change, beyond employment, education, and qualification outcomes. The soft outcomes most commonly identified based on country evidence and national evaluations (e.g. in Bulgaria, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom) are soft skills, increased self-esteem, and improved labour market prospects. More than half of the organisations involved in the delivery of ESF support who responded to the public consultation on TO9 agreed that participation in ESF supported actions generated soft-skills (57%) and increased self-confidence (54%).

Among the factors hindering or promoting ESF effectiveness which are relevant for TO9, the report highlights a supportive environment by the local communities, institutional capacity at all levels, regulatory requirements (such as the setting up and operation of the monitoring systems, the definition of simplified cost options, duplications of controls and compliance with state aid regulations), effective partnerships between managing authorities and partners, including NGOs, and the correct alignment of the operations with the needs of the target group.

It was also found that 143 of the 145 OPs that were planned for ESF TO9 operations were considered consistent with the country specific recommendations (CSRs) from 2014 to 2019.

The evaluation states that evidence from the three supporting studies shows that overall ESF operations have in general been relevant for the needs of target groups, although it is acknowledged that there is still room for improvement in this area. This could be achieved by better involving different actors in both the design and monitoring stages; stakeholder involvement is key to meeting target group needs – particularly those of the most disadvantaged groups.

In terms of participants reached, most of the participation recorded under TO9 involved people who were unemployed (53%) and had a low education level - primary or lower secondary - (54%). A large proportion of participants were from people with a foreign background or from minority groups including Roma (28%) and people with a disability (16%).

However, evidence on whether ESF support for social inclusion reached the most vulnerable populations with the greatest needs is mixed. The assessment identified the risk of 'creaming' in TO9 operations, i.e. targeting less vulnerable people with less complex needs who can get better results. For example, in Poland, the managing authority of the national ESF operational programme believed that the focus on monitoring employment results created a tendency to recruit participants who were more likely to become employed rather than the people furthest away from the labour market.

While it seems that the partnership principle was correctly implemented in the PAs, most stakeholders consulted expressed concerns about the insufficient involvement and diversification of stakeholders.

The report adds that there is also evidence that the ex-ante conditionalities led to greater coherence with EU and national policies, fostering structural reforms in some of the Member States/regions that had to fulfil them. There is also evidence that ESF support to social inclusion played a significant role in funding measures fighting social exclusion and poverty, complementing national policies. A volume effect was identified in 22 Member States. This effect was primarily observed in terms of complementarity with national efforts (17 Member States: Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden, and Romania) and in terms of boosting funding for social inclusion (5 Member States). The ESF also provided coverage for specific target groups that were not covered or that received less coverage than in nationally funded operations.

The evaluation concludes that there is evidence that ESF operations have a sustainable positive impact on participants. More than half of the results generated for ESF support to social inclusion were for employment-focused actions. An additional 35% of results were generated for operations with measures influencing attitudes and systems. The result-level achievement rate was more moderate than that for outputs, which is in line with the fact that results take more time to materialise, especially for disadvantaged groups. Moreover, social inclusion operations helped reduce discrimination, improved integration of marginalised communities, changed attitudes towards education and increased soft skills.

Finally, the evaluation report provides some recommendations in view of ESF+:

- operational programme strategies should be embedded into national (or regional) strategies.
- adequate levels of human and institutional resources are needed to achieve effective operational programme implementation.
- strong partnerships between managing authorities and stakeholders are required.
- operation design and implementation should be based on target group needs.
- ESF-supported actions bring about changes beyond employment and qualifications; there is a need to better showcase these.
- more should be done to promote the visibility of ESF support and mutual learning.
- more timely availability of data is crucial to provide robust evidence on the impacts of ESF interventions.

The **2016 Altus study for the European Commission** reports that the most frequent types of territory affected by poverty identified in the PAs and OPs are those with socially marginalised communities, urban and rural areas, and areas with permanent geographical and demographic handicaps. In total, 16 PAs and OPs from 19 MS declared territories affected by poverty. Only 28 OPs performed a full analysis of the needs of vulnerable groups and fewer than half of the PAs comprise concrete actions for poor regions or vulnerable groups.

The first phase of the **Feasibility study for a Child Guarantee** provides an overview of funding available through ESIF, the figures presented are only estimates. A limited number of practice examples are provided, some of which involve the use of ESF. The study concludes that investments in children are not clearly visible in the strategic and monitoring framework of most EU funds and suggests ways that EU funds, including ESF, could be better used and targeted to deliver on a child guarantee.

**'Mini Tool Kit to support and encourage the use of ESF+ for actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children'**. This tool kit was produced as part of the work of the ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform (2020-2022) managed by the European Commission, DG for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion. The toolkit draws on exchanges during a peer-to-peer training on programming actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children, held in January 2021. It is designed for those managing or implementing the ESF+, including managing authorities, intermediate bodies, relevant ministries, public bodies responsible for protecting children, stakeholders (including children's organisations), and relevant policy and desk officers in the European Commission. The tool kit includes, lessons learned from measures funded under the ESF 2014-2020 and relevant case studies. It also includes a checklist on programme actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children under the ESF+.

The **2020 Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2019** informs that, for social inclusion, to which the ESF is the biggest contributor, the projects selected so far represent almost €57 billion. By end-2019, thanks to ESF support, 2.5 million participants with disabilities, 5.6 million migrants, participants with a foreign background or minorities and 6.5 million other disadvantaged people had received help to improve their employment opportunities and develop the right skills for the jobs market.

## REPORTS OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS

In its **special report on ex-ante conditionalities**, the Court found that they provided a consistent framework for assessing the Member States' readiness to implement EU funds at the start of the 2014-2020 programme period. However, it is unclear to what extent this has effectively led to changes on the ground. Around half of the more than 700 action plans adopted by Member States to fulfil all ex-ante conditionalities were not reported as completed by the end of 2016. These uncompleted action plans cover at most 27 % of the ERDF, CF, and ESF spending.

Their **2016 report on Roma integration** argues that the amount channelled specifically to Roma integration initiatives by the means of ESF and ERDF is not recorded. However, Member States' planning documents suggest that around 1.5 billion euros has been earmarked for the socioeconomic integration of marginalised communities such as Roma during the 2014-2020 programme period. The report is based on an auditing carried out in Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, and Romania, covering the period 2007-2015. In relation to the 2014-2020 period, a number of improvements are noted: for example, Roma integration is explicitly referred to in the ESF regulation and specific funding priority has been introduced. Moreover, Member States with CSRs related to Roma integration are obliged to devote funds to promoting it. We consider, however, that additional efforts are required at both Commission and Member State level to make sure that these changes will result in projects contributing in a more effective way to Roma integration on the ground.

Most ERDF and ESF projects examined during the audit had achieved their general objectives, but these objectives were often not specifically Roma related. They also concluded that projects that had been selected and implemented in accordance with 'best practice' criteria adopted by the Council, the so called common basic principles on Roma inclusion (CBP), were more likely to contribute effectively to the integration of the Roma population. Moreover, they found that monitoring the progress made by Roma integration projects has been difficult, mainly because of shortcomings in relation to the availability and quality of data on Roma participants. The lack of comprehensive and robust data is a problem not only in relation to projects, but also for policymaking at EU and national level.

The European Court of Auditors' **2020 report on child poverty** audited, among other instruments, the EU financial contributions available under the ESF in the programming period 2014-2020 to address child poverty. They mainly audited the European Commission and the relevant national authorities in Germany, Italy, Poland and Romania as well as international and non-governmental organisations active in the field of tackling child poverty. The criteria for selecting Member States included, amongst others, child poverty rates and Member States potential ESF allocation in combating child poverty. In total, under the ESF and ERDF specific Regulations there are 57 IPs. None of the IPs are specifically dedicated to tackling child poverty.

While the PAs for the four Member States visited had set targets for reducing poverty in general, none had set them for reducing child poverty explicitly. They reviewed five OPs and tried to identify the funds allocated to tackle child poverty. However, children in poverty are not an explicit target group for the ESF fund interventions and there are no horizontal selection criteria/eligibility conditions targeting the financial support for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. As such, it is not possible to establish whether these interventions directly benefited children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. All examined OPs include measures that should indirectly contribute positively to combating child poverty. Such measures include funds that aim at inclusion of persons at risk of poverty with the view to improve their participation in the labour market or at promoting employment.

The European Court of Auditors in its **2021 report on performance-based financing in cohesion policy** provides that in their audit on combating child poverty, they established that the Member States examined had all adopted anti-poverty strategies in line with EAC 9.1 "Existence and implementation of a national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction". However, they found several weaknesses in the implementation of these strategies. For Poland and Romania, for example, they concluded that national authorities had not monitored implementation effectively, and that the targets set in the strategies had already been met at the time of adoption. At the same time, the introduction of EACs may have made an indirect contribution - without them, the conditions for spending EU funds on the ground would have been even more challenging. A 2017 Commission study concluded that EACs made the deployment of the ESI Funds more effective and structured. It acknowledged, though, that the evidence was limited and that conclusions may be premature. Since then, the Commission has not carried out a further assessment of the impact of EACs on the effectiveness of spending on the ground.

### REPORTS BY AND STUDIES COMMISSIONED BY THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

A 2015 European Parliament's study which analysed the 28 PAs reported that the partnership principle has been implemented with the active participation of local social partners as well as of civil society. The participation of stakeholders is well documented in general both at PA and OP levels. In addition, as mentioned in the programme strategies, the involvement of various types of stakeholders, such as civil society representatives, NGOs, economic and social partners is planned in the implementation phases, some of them taking part in the decision-making process as members of monitoring committees.

### REPORTS BY AND STUDIES COMMISSIONED BY OTHER EU INSTITUTIONS

A **2018 Committee of the Region's study investigates statistical data on the state of play of employment, social inclusion, and education at the local and regional level, as well as the related ESF interventions** through TO8, 9 and 10 and their synergies with other funds. The report also analyses the place-based approach by considering how the needs identified at the regional and local level have been addressed by the programme strategies and what arrangements have been made at programme level to ensure the participation of regional and local stakeholders in programme implementation, coupled with examples of place-based approach based on the use of integrated tools (e.g. Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)). It reports that social inclusion had a strong acceleration of project selection, reaching EUR 16.5 billion (26%) in 2016 with measures to support active inclusion playing a key role in supporting vulnerable groups and bringing them closer to the labour market. However, there are concerns about the delay in implementing measures for the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities and social inclusion in deprived urban areas in general. The report concludes by putting forward some recommendations, including increasing and improving cooperation and participation among the stakeholders involved in ESF programming and implementation at all levels of government and among Member States to increase exchange of good practices.

## REPORTS BY NGOS

The report from the European Network on Independent Living on **'The use of ESI Funds during 2014 – 2020 and the impact on the right of persons with disabilities to independent living'** highlights the arguments why ESI Funds should be used to support the right of children, adults and older persons with disabilities to live independently in the community and points to the main problems that arose during that programming period.

The report draws some lessons:

- *Failure to invest into community-based services, such as personal assistance, and accessible housing:* yet not many Member States use ESI Funds to facilitate access to personal assistance and those that do are not making it available to persons with disabilities leaving institutions. In Member States where personal assistance is funded through the ESF (such as Croatia and Portugal), this service is aimed at people living in the community and is limited in coverage and scope (i.e. the maximum number of hours a person can have assistance for). ESI funds have also not been used to significantly increase availability of housing options for persons with disabilities, such as social housing, or accessible and affordable houses and apartments in the community. Instead, many persons with disabilities have been forced to choose between a large institution and a group home, or another segregated setting.
- *Replacing large institutions for children with disabilities and large institutions for adults with disabilities with smaller institutions:* Whereas the closure of institutions for children has progressed faster, many children with disabilities were moved into smaller residential facilities (referred to, among other, as family-like homes, family homes and small group homes), rather than being returned to their biological families or provided with other forms of family-based care (according to information available to ENIL, in 2014 – 2020, this has been the case for Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania and Romania). Similarly, adults with disabilities have been moved from large into smaller institutions: group homes, small group homes, supported housing, protected or sheltered housing, and independent living centres (this has been the case for Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia).
- *Lack of progress with deinstitutionalisation:* In several Member States with a large number of persons with disabilities in institutions, including France, Belgium, Germany and Spain, deinstitutionalisation has not been a priority for ESI Funds at all.

The 2016 EAPN **Barometer Report – Monitoring the implementation of the (at least) 20% of the European Social Fund that should be devoted to fight against poverty during the period 2014-2020**<sup>1</sup>. This report was produced early in the policy cycle but already they drew some key findings. They reported more formal partnership and participation but a low-quality engagement of NGOs. Positive examples of engagement at the time included Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania, and Poland. Negative examples, with formal adoption only in Bulgaria, Finland, Portugal, and Slovakia. They reported that the social sector was represented in all the Monitoring Committees from the country's that were covered, but the quality of this participation is strongly contested.

The report noted that the 20% earmarking is being respected but questioned whether it will reduce poverty and social exclusion? The main question raised was whether the focus on activation, rather than broader active inclusion, would be able to address poverty? The requirement to have National Strategic Frameworks in place was important but, in many cases, there was a poor linking of ESF investments to the strategic frameworks, Estonia and Poland were seen as an exception to this finding. Integrated Roma Inclusion strategies had a more positive assessment, with questions how far they cover the full 4 pillars of employment, education, healthcare, and housing. The report identifies that there was a wide variation of target groups being targeted but with weak implementation. On addressing gender, the report indicated that the strategies developed and the degree they are mainstreamed into the PAs and OPs is more positive. In terms of Disability strategies, a wide variation, with well-developed strategies in countries such as, Portugal, Malta, and Estonia, whilst in Germany, Denmark, Slovakia, Latvia, and Romania there are specific measures in the OP but no specific strategy.

European Roma Grassroots Organisation (ERGO) produced two reports which included a strong focus on the use of ESF. A report, **Roma inclusion in the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) cycle 2014-2020**, identified that unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, which are key topics for Europe's Roma, are among the challenges that the EU has identified for CLLD. Approved CLLD strategies can mean that significant EU funds, including ESF funds, can be available to support those activities. This report developed by ERGO and partners, examines the functioning of the CLLD and the engagement of Roma communities and organisations in CLLD in the 2014-2020 cycle, in Bulgaria (Integro Association), Czech Republic (Solvo 21) and Romania (Nevo Parudimos). The Report provides a case study on CLLD actions supported by ESF, for each of the three countries and draws lessons learned from the current period that can inform future CLLD practice.

In the second ERGO report, **Case Studies, Ineffectiveness or misuse of EU funds, Synthesis report of case studies from ERGO Network members in 4 countries**, ERGO members from Romania (Policy Centre for Roma and Minorities), Bulgaria (Integro Association), Hungary (Butterfly Development) and Slovakia (Roma Advocacy and Research Centre) conducted case studies to support monitoring of EU funds and to contribute to a better design of funding programmes. The case studies found that: EU, Roma related funds are not always implemented adequately or in the best interest of the Roma communities it intends to target.





# EXPERIENCE FROM 7 COUNTRIES

## BULGARIA

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

The Bulgarian Operational Programme (OP) 'Human Resources Development' will receive a total ESF investment of over EUR 1 billion, including funding from the Youth Employment Initiative. This OP includes investment of approximately EUR 286 million, dedicated to social inclusion measures. These measures according to the official documents, *'will target groups such as the young and older members of society, those with disabilities, and minorities such as Roma. Social entrepreneurship and access to vocational training will be promoted, as will better access to health and social care services'*. The OP "Science and Education for Smart Growth" is also expected to contribute to the thematic objective social inclusion (TO9).

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

The public authorities highlighted the importance of the thematic concentration of at least 20% on social inclusion. They also highlighted the investment priorities.

- Socio economic integration of marginalised communities such as the Roma.
- Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability.
- Enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high quality services, including health care and social services of general interest"

They highlighted that these priorities enabled investments to support; access to employment, creating the conditions for tackling the negative stereotypes in relation to Roma, the active inclusion of disadvantaged groups with special needs and other vulnerable groups into the society and education, training, healthcare, and social services. The requirements to link ESF investments to anti-poverty strategies and policy frameworks was also highlighted as important. The Public Authorities highlighted, the 'National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020' the 'Strategy for Long-Term Care', and the National Strategy for 'Deinstitutionalisation of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria'.

EAPN Bulgaria reported that it was aware of the improvements in the regulation in relation to the fight against poverty. That the 20% earmarking for social inclusion did create more awareness and discussion about poverty. However, they reported that there was no significant shift in approach in the type of projects supported from the previous round and the main approach remained focused on activation to the labour market without the necessary focus on the quality of the jobs. Social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination, was given some visibility but these terms and concepts stay blurred. There was some attention to low levels of benefits but without attention to real costs of living or methods such as reference budgets. However, EAPN Bulgaria reported some indirect positive effects such as distribution and building more knowledge on poverty and the necessary anti-poverty actions.

## PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

The Managing Authority highlighted the following elements of the Operational Programme, Human Resources Development, that they consider of particular importance for combating poverty and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, especially children and their families, elderly, people who cannot care for themselves independently, people with disabilities, people in institutional care, and minorities such as Roma.

- Support for reforms to phase out the institutional model of care and to develop cross-cutting social inclusion services, both in the community and in family, or family-like, environments. The programme supports policies for children and families, focuses on prevention, early intervention, support for families, and the aim to provide a family or family-like environment to every Bulgarian child. A key tool for attaining these goals is the deinstitutionalisation of childcare and this is one of the main funding headings under this OP.
- In the context of deinstitutionalisation, this OP also provides for targeted support for replacement of the institutional model of care for the elderly with home-based or community services, fostering cooperation between healthcare and social services, in line with the National Strategy for Long-Term Care.
- Actions targeted at Roma integration, responding to the unfavourable social and economic living conditions for the greater part of this ethnic group. These actions are aimed at improved access to employment and various types of services, including access to educational, healthcare and social services.
- Supports for the social economy and social entrepreneurship aimed at giving vulnerable groups access to economic opportunities, which are understood as key to solving the issues of poverty and social exclusion. This support acts on the assumption that social economy organisations, working at local level can reach people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and have the potential to mobilise them to take up economic opportunities to improve their own living situations.

- Vulnerable groups on the labour market and the economically inactive are most at risk of poverty and social exclusion due to low level of education, inactive behaviour, lack of work habits and others. The procedures “Socio-economic integration of vulnerable groups” and “Centres for Employment and Social Assistance” are aimed at the persons from these risk groups.
- “Socio-economic integration of vulnerable groups” aims to contribute to improved quality of life, social inclusion, and poverty reduction, as well as to the long-term integration of the most marginalised communities such as the Roma, by implementing holistic actions and applying an integrated approach.

EAPN Bulgaria recognises the importance of the programmes provided but point out that the programmes are rarely at a level of support that can lift people out of poverty. They point to the fact that there was a target to shift 260000 out of poverty in the National Strategy 2020, but the likely result is more like 46 thousand people in 2019 compared to the baseline 2008, according to official data. They point to the fact that it is difficult to assess information on the impact of ESF to fight poverty. The information that is generally available comes from the annual reports on the implementation of Operational Programme Human Resource Development with reference to European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative, which contains mainly figures that are not easy to interpret and a ‘Citizen Report’ which is extremely general. The information provided on different projects – is often very fragmented.

EAPN Bulgaria also points to the information that comes from the reporting on the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030, adopted in December 2020. For instance, they point to an example in relation to homelessness, which is from the EU ERDF support which highlights that for the programming period 2014-2020, 16 contracts for construction of social housing worth BGN 40,290,440 were concluded, as a result of which, construction or rehabilitation of 812 individual social housing in 14 urban areas was implemented.

EAPN Bulgaria recognises the efforts made to address the needs of children with special educational needs and to address early school dropout. But they point to the trends which show that since 2011 the trend in early school dropout is developing in an unfavourable way from 11.8% in 2011 to 13.8% in 2016. In 2017 and 2018 the figures remained stable, but in 2019 there is again an increase to 13.9%. While

EAPN Bulgaria does not consider that the pro-employment actions are targeted to addressing poverty, they acknowledge that there are some good examples, such as the support for bridging university graduates with employers. They recognise that different projects contributed to capacity building of different institutions and NGOs, that builds accumulated knowledge and capacity that could be useful if used properly in the future.

Integro Association reports that the ESF projects implemented in Bulgaria are not able to solve the issues of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. They do not reach the poorest and most marginalized people and groups. Poor Roma people have become even poorer. Child poverty in Bulgaria is over 30%, and among Roma children it is twice as high. In their view the projects supported are partial, scattered, and unsystematic and are not results-oriented, do not solve problems and do not meet needs, do not have any sustainability. The capacity building and other soft measures and activities of the projects are poorly implemented. They make the case that it is not a matter of allocating more financial resources, but also of directing them so that they reach the people with the greatest needs, while helping them to overcome poverty and isolation effectively. They highlight how restrictive conditions can often exclude those with the greatest needs.

## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

**“Services for early childhood development”** are supported under this OP that aim to prevent social exclusion, reduce poverty among children through investments in early childhood development and through integrated social services for children from vulnerable groups, incl. children with disabilities and their families, as well as support for future parents. This measure aims to provide assistance to 48,000 children at risk and their families.

The **“Centres for Employment and Social Assistance”** operation provides comprehensive services in support of vulnerable groups through multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach by joint teams of the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) and the Employment Agency (EA) - Centres for Employment and Social Assistance (CESA) in order to prevent social exclusion and improve the quality of life, as well as to build a smooth transition between passive receipt of social benefits to the inclusion of people in permanent employment. Through this approach a pilot model for co-integrated services for vulnerable groups and individualisation of services is implemented.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

Following the legislative framework in Bulgaria there is formal involvement of NGOs from the following sectors on the Monitoring Committee (MC):

- NGOs in the sphere of gender equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities
- NGOs in the sphere of social inclusion and integration of marginalized groups
- NGOs in the sphere of child welfare
- NGOs in the sphere of youth
- NGO in the sphere of public health, etc.

EAPN Bulgaria or Anti-Poverty NGOs are not mentioned, but they report that NGOs linked to vulnerable groups are included in the monitoring committee, but that anti-poverty NGOs are not mentioned in the list of NGOs to be included. They report that the impact of the participation is not clear and that they were not aware of independent evaluations of the Monitoring Committee.

NGOs are eligible beneficiaries and partners under many of the operations, financed by the Operational Programme (OP) ‘Human Resources Development’ priority 2, focused on social inclusion and reducing poverty. They are eligible beneficiaries and partners in their capacity of social service providers as well. EAPN Bulgaria reports that it would seem there was some improvement from previous rounds, but the effects are far from satisfying and the aims of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy 2020 have not been achieved.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

- Thematic concentration for social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination is a key factor for programming specific and targeted measures. There is a real challenge to ensure focus on actions to address poverty within this wide social inclusion focus.
- To combat poverty, poverty needs to be at the centre of the actions, with clear definitions, actions to be undertaken and expected outcome. There is a need not only to invest in activation to the labour market but to strengthen investment in the wider active inclusion understanding; access to essential services, improvements in the systems to allow better access to adequate incomes, fostering participation in society. Central to addressing poverty in Bulgaria is a clear assessment of what is needed for adequate minimum incomes (following a methodology such as reference budgets) and building the whole system on that basis.
- There is a need to move from just the formal implementation of the partnership principle to a more active engagement of all relevant partners, including anti-poverty NGOs and people experiencing poverty. Financial investments will be needed for this transition to become a reality.
- In the view of EAPN Bulgaria, while the integrated approach is often mentioned it is far from reality. Different institutions stay apart in their actions and provide activities in their sphere (mainly in the labour market and some in education and healthcare). This is the same at municipal level. Thus, the problem is not that there are no actions at local level, but the problem is more that there are few integrated community approaches - for example, this is very important for children in a disadvantage community - especially for children living in ghettos and other disadvantaged areas. Developing real integrated approaches should be a key priority for the ESF+
- For NGOs the high expectations Bulgarian society had that European Structural Funds would have a high impact on welfare, must be restored. The growing public impressions that the funds are used in improper, not useful, or corrupt ways, needs to be addressed. It is necessary to reorganise the information flows for ESF+ in a way that is convincing for the public. The whole policy cycle of the ESF fund needs improvement on national level with much more clarity, transparency, better statistical databases, and independent evaluations. As well

as reporting on how many people took place in different activities, how many events took place and how many people were employed or trained, there needs to be clear efforts to report the numbers of people that have been taken out of poverty and how the ESF contributed to that.

## CZECHIA

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

The Czech Republic had three Operational Programmes under the Thematic Objective 9 (TO9) Social Inclusion:

- OP Prague – Growth Pole, targeted on strengthening research, technological development and innovation, on sustainable urban mobility and energy savings in public buildings, and on promoting social inclusion and better quality of education.
- OP Research, Development and Education, with the objective that most of the funding would be invested to promote inclusive education at all levels, including the integration of marginalised Roma children into mainstream education. The focus is on social inclusion rather than a specific focus on combating poverty.
- OP Employment, including a specific focus on fighting poverty through funding support measures to improve the situation of people excluded or at risk of social exclusion, for example by increasing their chances to find a job and by improving the quality of social and health services.

The ESF Funding for the period is projected at EUR 3.4 billion and the Czech Authorities expect that between 24% to 26% will be spent on social inclusion.

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

Discussion with NGO representatives and with officials, highlighted the importance of the requirement to have 'a national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction aiming at the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market' and 'a national Roma strategic policy framework', as laid out in the Annex of the Regulation, for ensuring a stronger focus on social inclusion in this round. The Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) on Roma inclusive education was also vital to ensure use of ESF funds to tackle this challenge. There was also general agreement that efforts were made to ensure

that the projects supported under these operational programmes were designed to ensure they included people and communities at greater risk of poverty and exclusion. The requirement in the ESF Regulation that 'at least 20% of the total ESF resources in each Member State shall be allocated to the thematic objective "promoting social inclusion"' was also considered important for ensuring a strong focus on addressing social inclusion.

## PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

- The ESF was used to support a Pilot Initiative on Housing First in Brno. This was broadly welcomed and demonstrated the importance of a collective and partnership approach between, the people concerned, on the ground and national organisations, local authorities, academics, Ministry, and policy makers.
- To follow up on the CSR in relation to inclusive education of Roma a new law was introduced to end separate Roma schools and segregated classes, in favour of the inclusion of Roma in mainstream classes. ESF funds were used to support the implementation of this new law by supporting specialised teachers in the mainstream classes to assist with this change. This was considered a good improvement, but it was seen that there was a difference in approach between the Ministry personnel who addressed the needs of directors of schools, and Roma organisations who wanted attention to the needs of the parents and the children concerned prioritised. For Roma organisations it is not enough to include Roma in mainstream classes, the way mainstream classes work need also to be changed to embrace this new reality.
- ESF provided funding for support for social services to help people directly in a holistic manner to deal with the problems of debt, which is a major issue in the Czech Republic. NGOs often played a role in delivering these services. Romadrom also had a role to deliver these services, however even if they are a Roma organisation the majority of the clients receiving this support from them were not from the Roma community.
- Through the OP 'Prague – Growth Pole of the Czech Republic', promoting social inclusion and combating poverty was focused on support in areas of the city described as socially excluded localities. The projects that were supported were mostly aimed at cultural-community centres set up by city districts

or NGOs operating in the local community and to the social enterprises employing socially excluded or socially disadvantaged people. The most common target groups that use culture-community centres as a means of integration into the local community are: seniors, families with children in a vulnerable social position, single parents caring for children, children and young people from a family in a vulnerable social position, people after imprisonment and the homeless. The social enterprises employ people with disabilities, people with mental illness, unemployed people over 50 years of age, long-term unemployed people, homeless people and persons with a criminal record. In the years 2014 - 2021, a total of 131 community centres and 48 social enterprises in Prague were supported through the ESF.

## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

**Housing First for Families (Rapid Re-housing Project).** In this project 50 flats around the city of Brno were used to support a housing first approach. The project focused on families with children in sub-standard housing and flats were offered for a one-year period with the possibility of prolongation. 50 families were chosen by lottery from 421 applicants. The project started in 2016. The project worked in cooperation with 'peer workers' who have experience with homelessness in the city of Brno. After the families were chosen, they were given a questionnaire about housing wishes (how the apartment should look like, in which neighbourhood, etc) and the families could also choose a social worker from IQ Roma Servis based on the methodology of 'ideal types of social workers'. A key element of the project was the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and the active engagement of the people directly concerned in line with the Housing First principles. The partnership included NGOs active in the city on homelessness, Brno Municipality, the University of Ostrava and HVO Querido (Netherlands) and engagement with the ESF managing authorities and the National Ministries concerned. 48 of the families involved had their leases extended. Based on the success and the lessons learned in the project the ESF+ has proposals to upscale the housing first approach across Czechia.

**Debt Counselling Services:** The number of over-indebted people in Czechia is increasing very rapidly. ESF is used to provide holistic debt counselling to support people with debt problems. This counselling takes place in specialized counselling centres, which also focus on civil counselling (e.g. lease agreements, divorce, custody of children, insolvency). Caritas Czech Republic, People in Need, Romadrom, the

Institute for Debt Relief, Rubikon and others, provide these debt counselling services. However, it is important to note that the legislation that enables the provision of debt counselling is set up in such a way that many people who need the support still cannot be helped. The conditions for entry into the service, such as the requirement that the person in debt must have a certain level of income or assets, can prevent many people in poverty from accessing the service. On entering debt relief, a person is assessed and an amount that they cannot easily survive on, unless family and friends help them, is agreed. This amount is protected for their living allowance in the period of debt relief (5 years).

**A Good Job in the Neighbourhood project** was developed with support from ESF. The project aims to 'support and develop ways of employing persons who face difficulties entering the labour market in their towns and neighbourhoods'. It responded to the past 'community service' workfare approach, which was heavily criticised for not bringing about a change in the situation of the people who worked in this scheme. It worked on the principle that 'the aim of supporting unemployed people should not be employment per se, but a change in their position on the labour market'. It argued that in order for employment in the municipality to be a truly good job, it has to allow people who are threatened by social exclusion to make a real-life change. It was seen as crucial to support the creation of employment opportunities directly by the local administrations, as well as supporting social services for people who face difficulties to access work but jobs that added value for the people employed while making public spending more effective.

The project had two parts: 1) Research and analysis to identify, key barriers that prevent certain groups from gaining and maintain quality employment, existing practices of job creation and support where local administrations are involved employing and gathering practices from other countries. 2) the creation of job opportunities and systems of employment with the active engagement of local authorities, in six municipalities or micro-regions around the Czech Republic which were identified to participate in this project. In addition, the project supported the creation of an evaluation system, opportunities for exchange of experience between the towns and municipalities involved as well as opportunities to learn from experiences outside of Czechia.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

Larger social NGOs and faith-based organisations in particular, Save the Children and Caritas Czech Republic, were extensively engaged in the planning, monitoring and implementation of the ESF. These NGOs and Romadrom were also beneficiaries of the Funds and were key partners in the delivery of projects supported by the Funds. There was also a collective of organisations addressing issues for Roma that worked together, including to address issues in relation to the ESF. A significant proportion of the funds of Romadrom are from EU sources. EAPN Czech Rep and Open Society were also organisations who contributed and sought to be involved in the use of ESF.

There was a loss of targeted calls to specific groups such as Roma in this round but the approach to have key groups experiencing poverty and discrimination included in more general programmes and actions is favoured. There was a Roma strategy developed, with limited Roma participation, to comply with the requirements under the ESF. This strategy was rejected by the Roma groups and eventually there was agreement to develop a new strategy, which was agreed in 2020, a little late for this round of ESF, but should help to have better measures to include Roma in the ESF+. Romadrom recognises that there have been improvements in this round of the ESF but still point out that there is room for improvement in how Roma issues are tackled and with NGOs participation in the programmes, to achieve better results.

In general, it was felt that while there was an improvement in the delivery of services it was still more actions for, rather than reflection and actions with, people experiencing poverty and exclusion. There were no real targeted efforts to involve people from the communities effected by poverty or discrimination in paid roles in relation to the delivery of the services. However, there are Roma employed as social workers in the Roma organisations and in other NGOs who deliver ESF projects.

NGOs are on the ESF monitoring committee including Caritas Czech Republic, People in Need and the Institute for Debt Prevention, all of whom are strongly focussed on work to combat poverty.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

Key challenges that were identified for ensuring a focus on poverty and social inclusion going forward included:

- Respecting the enabling conditions and ensuring that programmes and actions supported by ESF are in response to relevant national action strategies, developed with all key actors involved including the people and communities who are the target of the actions.
- Developing an analytical approach through fostering the links between those experiencing poverty, the organisations working on the ground, academics, and policy makers (the housing first projects in the current round demonstrated this) in order to develop a clearer analytical approach to addressing poverty and exclusion. Cross country comparisons and country specific recommendations can also contribute to this analytical approach.
- Social and health systems are strictly divided in the legislation but come together in the everyday experience of people living in poverty, there is a need to overcome this type of separation.
- Remaining focused on homelessness and housing, including housing for Roma, upscaling the practice and learning from the Housing First Pilot in Brno, while contributing to the development of housing policy more generally. Efforts to ensure joint projects between ESF and ERDF, particularly to address homelessness and housing were considered innovative and important to be developed further in the future.
- Continuing to provide support to help people in a holistic manner to deal with their debts and the problems associated with indebtedness.
- Responding to the impact of Covid-19, which has shown an increase in demand for support. This will be a challenge for the integration of FEAD into the ESF+ to remain focused on those with the greatest needs. During the Covid period online meetings have enabled a greater participation of different actors in key meetings associated with the monitoring and implementation of the ESF funding, this practice should be continued in the future.
- Developing a capacity building approach so that it is not just services for people and communities that experience poverty and exclusion but also investing in them, so that the people and communities experiencing poverty, can really be active in addressing their problems and contributing to finding the responses needed to address their realities.
- Managing gaps between funding periods is always a big challenge. Ensuring continuity or mainstreaming of practices that have shown their worth during this period in the following period. This is particularly important for practices under Operational Programmes that will not continue in the new round.
- Stronger cooperation between all the NGOs concerned by the ESF would also be advantageous to ensuring better outcomes.
- EU Commission officials have a very important role to play in the development and delivery of national programmes by reminding all the key actors of the key requirements of the Regulation and pushing to have the appropriate involvement of all the stakeholders including the representatives of people and communities experiencing, poverty, exclusion, or discrimination, in all stages of the implementation.

## GREECE

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Greece has 17 Operational Programmes under the ESF, 13 of which are based on support to regions. Each of these 13 regional OPs include investments in Thematic Objective (TO) 9, Social Inclusion, ranging from 6.44% in Western Macedonia, to 25% in the Peloponnese. These investments are primarily aimed at integration in the labour market but increased access to health and social care services is frequently mentioned. The main investments in social inclusion are in the regional programmes but the national operational programmes “Human Resources Development, Education and Life Lifelong Learning” and “Reform of the Public Sector” also include investments in the thematic objective, social inclusion.

The ESF Funding for the period 2014-2020 is projected at EUR 3.8 billion. The sum of the national and EU funding exceeds 4.8 billion euros and constitutes almost 20% of the total Greek NSRF budget for the programming period 2014-2020. It is expected that approximately 25% of the ESF in Greece will be used for the TO 9 on social inclusion.

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

The thematic concentration requiring 20% to be earmarked for ‘promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination’ was considered the main change in the regulation that had a positive impact on the use of ESF to combat poverty. The provisions in the common regulation that required a strategic framework for active inclusion and an anti-poverty strategy were also considered important. The enabling condition requiring ‘measures for the shift from institutional to family and community-based care’ created a focus on this key area. These frameworks helped to avoid an ad hoc use of ESF funds and directed investments to actions within a national policy framework.

### PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

In Greece it was considered that the objective to combat poverty was best served within the regional OPs. However, there was a common menu for social inclusion actions within these individual programmes. These included:

- The flagship ESF inclusion measures in Greece are the ‘community centres’. These are a ‘one-stop shop’ providing a range of services and information. They are primarily aimed at people experiencing poverty or exclusion and aim to link them to appropriate employment, social, health and counselling services. The community centres played a central role in processing applications for the newly introduced minimum income scheme in Greece. So far approximately 250 of the 325 municipalities now have these centres.
- ESF support for social groceries, social pharmacies, and soup kitchens. ESF supports costs for staff and overheads. The food comes from other sources, including donations.
- ESF also supported actions to move from Institutional to community-based care and actions aimed at preventing institutionalisation.
- Specialized Educational Support for the Integration of Students with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs was funded under the Regional OPs and the sectoral OP “Human Resources Development, Education and Life Lifelong Learning 2014-2020”. It concerns the provision of support services at regular, general primary and secondary schools.
- Efforts to address the realities of Roma living in poor quality settlements ran into hindrances such as, inappropriate or hazardous areas where the settlements are based that pose difficulties for the implementation of small but basic infrastructure programs, lack of political will at regional/local level, bureaucratic processes, lack of interest and/or hostility from local non-Roma populations. Except for a few locations, actions proposed for this period were not delivered.
- Actions under the area of health also supported access to health care for people experiencing poverty, exclusion, or discrimination.



## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

**Community Centres**, act as a 'one stop contact point' for all the social protection services that the citizen needs. The website dedicated to Community Centres describes them as: 'Structures designed by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity, established in Municipalities and funded with ESF support, by the NSRF 2014-2020. The Community Centre is the first point of contact of the citizen with the social service of each Municipality. From there, the citizen is informed about all the benefits they are entitled to, all the institutions, services and programs that can provide them with social care of any kind, at the level of the Municipality, the Region, or the territory. The Community Centre of each Municipality can be addressed to all citizens of the region who themselves or members of their family face a social problem (unemployment, financial weakness, homelessness, problems of living due to disability or old age) and need the assistance of the State.

At the same time, the Community Centres provide counselling support services on issues such as approaching the local market to find a job, creating opportunities for young people to start their professional lives, problems of domestic violence or family disharmonies, legal issues, learning support for children and adolescents, organizing local events with educational, informative and social content.

Many Community Centres in mountainous or island Municipalities also have a mobile unit that serves the citizens of the most remote areas who do not need to move to the seat of the Municipality. In the Community Centres with branches for Roma and Migrants, the respective populations can turn to more specialized services that are related to the problems they face to improve their standard of living and their full social integration.

There are 242 Community Centres operating nationwide, with a budget of 130 million euros for 6 years of operation (considering the extensions and staff extensions with new recruitments) aiming at the support of family and with over 488,000 beneficiaries. The Implementing Bodies (Beneficiaries) are in the first instance Local Authorities and their Legal Entities.

Supported actions to prevent institutionalisation/ move from Institutional to community-based care included:

- **Day care centres for persons with disabilities (KDIF in Greek)**, which they provide daily care and hospitality services, including special treatment, according to an individualised plan, training in self-service and the learning of everyday life activities, creative occupation and socialisation activities, networking and co-operation actions with other social services/providers/institutions and the local community in general. The aim is to improve the quality of life of persons with high support needs, strengthening social cohesion and preventing institutionalisation and social exclusion, by focusing on the most vulnerable (priority was given to disabled who face multiple discrimination: residents in institutions, people with disabilities and living in poverty, without insurance, with unemployed parents, etc). Beneficiaries of the action are legal entities under private law -associations founded and run by parents of persons with disabilities- which operate day care centres for persons with disabilities under the current institutional framework.
- **"Supported Living Houses"** ("SYD" in Greek), which are houses of 4 -9 persons. SYD are addressed to persons with physical, psychosocial, intellectual and/or sensorial disabilities with various needs, who cannot live independently without special support. They provide living and individualised care services (support for healthy and safe living, health/medical care, entertainment, and participation the community life, etc). The aim is to provide support living for those coming from residential institutions and in parallel to avoid new institutionalisation flows when immediate family cannot support their living. It is the only alternative to institutional care in Greece.

Actions to support reconciliation of work and family life included, **Childhood and early childhood Centres/ Creative activity Centres for children/ adults with disabilities ("KDAPameA') and for children without disabilities ("KDAP")**. These centres provide daily quality care and hospitality services for babies, infants, children, and persons with disabilities, as well as quality social services care for children and adults with disabilities. The aim is to facilitate job maintenance or job searching of mothers, fathers, and guardians (men and women) of children/adults with disabilities who live below the poverty threshold, to promote their employability and reconcile their family and professional life. The Creative Activity Centres for Children/Adults with Disabilities are operated by the municipalities or the private sector.

#### **Social Groceries, Pharmacies and Soup Kitchens:**

A social grocery store is defined as a store that distributes, on a regular basis, to beneficiaries, food, groceries, personal hygiene items, frozen products, clothing, footwear, books, toys, etc. The social pharmacy is a structure that provides free medicines, health supplies and pharmaceutical products, which are secured through specific collaborations with pharmaceutical companies and local pharmaceutical associations, as well as with the participation and mobilization of collective bodies, businesses, and citizens. There is also the action of "Soup Kitchens", which operate with a fixed schedule, has a specific minimum capacity to provide meals, the required staff and is connected to local businesses, schools, the local community, etc. There are about 220 Basic Goods Providing Structures nationwide, with a budget of approximately 38 million euros and with over 40,000 beneficiaries. These structures are supported with ESF investments, to cover costs of personal and some overheads. The food and goods are not supported by ESF. However, food and material assistance aid are available under the FEAD programme.

## **INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS**

The Greek Anti-Poverty Network was involved in the design of the ESF programmes and actions. NGOs in some municipalities were 'final beneficiaries' of ESF Funds. For instance, the social groceries and pharmacies are run by NGOs. Likewise, NGOs are key actors in the structures supporting the move from institutional to community-based care have been beneficiaries of the EU funds. NGOs collaborate closely with Community Centres and offer complementary services. However, the anti-poverty NGO sector is poorly resourced, meets many demands, and needs investment and capacity building support to take on a more active role in the monitoring, implementation, and evaluation of ESF.

The National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP), in Greece, is considered a confederation or umbrella organisation, representing the disability movement of Greece, this is a status different from an NGO in Greece. The Greek disability movement includes more than 550 organisations of persons with disabilities and chronic diseases and NCDP is officially recognised as a social partner of the Greek State, in relation to disability issues. As a social partner, the NCDP participates in all Monitoring Committees of all Operational Programmes (Regional and Sectorial) for the period 2014-2020 as a member with voting right. The NDCP was also actively involved in the designing of actions under the ESF. While not an anti-poverty organisation per se, it does represent the interests of many people at risk of poverty and exclusion and who experience discrimination. NCDP had an important impact on the use of the ESF.

Given its status as a social partner in Greece, the National Confederation of Disabled People of Greece (NCDP) implements the action "Observatory on Disability issues", co-funded by the ESF and implemented in the framework of the Greek Operational Programme "Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020". The aims of the "Observatory on Disability issues" are:

- to work as a disability policy monitoring and evaluating mechanism
- to strengthen the capacity building of NCDP as a disability policy maker
- to work as a human rights watch, for persons with disabilities in Greece

- to monitor the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (NCRPD) at national level
- to produce evidence-based political recommendations, which could contribute to the planning of a national disability strategy based on the human rights-based approach as enshrined by the UNCRPD
- to be the main source of information on disability issues, not only for the competent public authorities but also for Civil Society Organizations, DPOs, persons with disabilities and their families themselves etc
- to raise awareness about the real situation of persons with disabilities and their rights at national level
- to disseminate the social model of disability at national level.
- Ensure a continued focus on older people and children, in the investments and actions supported under deinstitutionalisation and the prevention of institutionalisation. Further support actions for long term care that combine both social and health services.
- Ensure the use of ESF to support the interaction with refugees, third country nationals and other communities experiencing severe exclusion, including Roma communities.
- Investment in actions to support the child guarantee and build on the work in the current round in relation to childhood and early childhood centres and creative activity centres for children/adults with disabilities and for children without disabilities. Build on the work in the current round to support a holistic framework for early childhood intervention services, provided by public institutions.
- Ensure actions to address the needs of homeless people are addressed, including support for housing first projects.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

- Important to ensure that all actions supported are part of a strategic effort to address poverty and exclusion and not ad-hoc ESF supported projects.
- To continue to support and ensure the sustainability of the community centres through, increased levels of personnel, investing in their training, language diversity needed to reach target populations, and increased cooperation with NGOs, to ensure outreach to those experiencing poverty, exclusion, and discrimination.
- Maintain and build on the work to ensure the participation of people with disabilities in society and in the world of work, building on the work to move from institutional to community-based care, and the prevention of institutionalisation, that was supported in the current round, though support for the development of a range of community-based services, support for personal assistance services and independent living, supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream schools and improving the synergy between the provision of primary health and early diagnosis and provision of therapy services. Ensure the developments on the social side are matched with developments in terms of improvements in access to physical infrastructures for people with disabilities.
- Developing more cooperation between ESF and ERDF projects and ensuring consistency with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).
- To support the development of social and anti-poverty NGOs, and the participation of people experiencing poverty and exclusion and to invest in building the capacity of that sector.

## IRELAND

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Ireland has one Operational Programme under the ESF, the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. The ESF Funding for the period 2014-2020 is projected at EUR 1.15 billion of which EUR610 million from the EU budget, including EUR 68 million from the [Youth Employment Initiative](#).

€298 million, or 29% of the total investment under the Programme, is assigned to activities 'to support active inclusion measures, to promote equal opportunities and to combat discrimination'. Ireland is set to exceed the required 20% of ESF Funds for social inclusion, poverty, and all forms of discrimination.

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

The most significant change identified by various actors, was the introduction of the obligation to allocate at least 20% of the ESF budget to the thematic objective promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination. The EU target to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion by 2020 was also considered important for ensuring a focus on poverty and inclusion for ESF investments. The 5% earmarked for child poverty, the required enabling conditions and support for social innovation were also considered important. However, for NGOs involved, the earmarking was most commonly described as being for social inclusion and that was reflected in the practice. According to the NGOs the broad definition of TO9 meant that it was often hard to really identify actions that were targeted at combating poverty.

### PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

Ireland's annual citizen information report on the OP PEIL 2020 describes the elements assigned to activities to support active inclusion, to promote equal opportunities and to combat discrimination measures, as:

- The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP): which tackles poverty and social exclusion in local communities.
- Youthreach: provides education, training and work experience for early school leavers.
- Garda (Police) Youth Diversion Projects: supports young people at risk of/or involved in criminal and/or anti-social behaviour.
- Young Persons Probation Projects: engage with young offenders in local communities.
- Disability Project (Ability Programme): a pre-activation programme for young people with disabilities.
- Integration and Employment of Migrants: promotes active inclusion and enhanced employment possibilities for vulnerable legally resident migrants.
- Tus Nua Project: promotes independent living and positive reintegration into the community for women leaving prison and other female offenders.
- Gender Equality: supports women wanting to return to the labour market and women entrepreneurs.

These were the key areas of ESF investments linked to the 20% earmarked for TO9.

## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

The **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)** is considered a key area of investment to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnerships between individuals experiencing disadvantage, community organisations and public sector agencies. SICAP is funded by the Irish Government through the Department of Rural and Community Development and receives funding from the European Social Fund under the OP Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. This programme has 13 target groups and has a clear focus on people further from the labour market and access to mainstream services. The programme is overseen at a local level by 33 Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), with support from local authorities, and actions are delivered by local implementing partners, predominantly Local Development Companies (LDCs).

SICAP aims to address high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative, locally led approaches. It supports disadvantaged communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in areas with high levels of deprivation, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma community and other groups experiencing disadvantage. The core areas of work undertaken by SICAP to support individuals includes, helping people to find work or to upskill, providing CV training, access for personal development courses, support to access work placement programmes and lifelong learning opportunities. SICAP has a particular role to play in supporting the integration of new communities (migrants experiencing economic disadvantage, asylum seekers and refugees) in terms of their inclusion in employment, education, access to services, social connections and political engagement. SICAP also provides targeted support to local community groups and social enterprises.

Specific examples that illustrate the diverse social inclusion work undertaken under the programme include:

- The development in the county of Kildare of a strategy for Traveller and Roma people. It demonstrates collaboration and is underpinned by the partnership approach engaging statutory, community and voluntary service providers alongside Traveller and Roma people.
- Support for a community café in an area of Limerick city, including the development of a Community Café guide, highlighting the impact community cafés have on the people who use them. It demonstrates the positive community integration role the Community Café has in supporting disadvantaged individuals.
- Promoting sustainable livelihoods for an island community, Cape Clear, which relies on mainland deliveries for their food supplies, was further heightened during COVID. Alongside this, local farmers and fishers were experiencing economic challenges. Arising from this, support was given for the development of a farmers market selling local produced goods and crafts.
- SICAP staff developed bespoke training sessions and resources, specifically for community groups and social enterprises in a county in the west of Ireland, Mayo, to enable them to reopen and operate safely within Covid-19 restrictions. The package included one-to-one online support sessions, phone support, templates for compliance, induction training templates and group seminars to support peer learning and sharing of experiences.

SICAP has invested highly in both quantitative and qualitative work, at national and local levels, to evaluate and document the impact of the programme, with a view to identifying key learnings to inform ongoing implementation and future programme design.

The **Migrant Access Programme (MAP)** was developed under the 'Integration and Employment of Migrants' strand of the OP PEIL. The MAP was a free nationwide service established by [New Communities Partnership \(NCP\)](#) in 2017. NCP's aim was to support migrants to overcome cultural and personal barriers and empower them to access employment opportunities as residents in Ireland. The MAP was delivered through two actions: employment training and public information sessions. Both were delivered by multi-lingual facilitators which enabled the programme to be inclusive of participants whose first language was not English, based on individual needs assessment.

MAP 'employment training' was delivered nationwide, in a four week, two days a week training, that involve focused group work and personalised one-to-one support. Topics covered included: getting work ready, English, essential IT skills, creating a successful CV and cover letter template, presentation and effective communication skills, interview skills and support for self-employment. Six months' follow-up support was offered for MAP training participants.

MAP interactive 'public information sessions' were offered nationwide as half-day information and awareness raising sessions on topics such as: employment rights and entitlements, revenue, qualification recognition, training and volunteer experience, employment supports and services available.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

NGOs were not engaged in the Partnership Agreement or the design of the Operational Programme. However, often there is a high degree of consultation with civil society in relation to key elements supported under the OP such as the SICAP programme or National Strategies which should inform ESF investments, such as the National Traveller and Roma Strategy, which was developed with the engagement of Traveller and Roma NGOs. The Wheel, which is a supporting and representative Network for civil society, receives funding to highlight opportunities for NGOs to apply for EU funds. NGOs are end beneficiaries of funds from ESF such as the adult literacy NGO (NALA) who receive funds to deliver elements of ESF programmes. Migrant organisations also received funds for elements in programmes addressed to migrants. However, in general anti-poverty NGOs report less engagement with ESF over a long period now and less engagement overall with EU funds since the end of EU programmes such as EQUAL.

The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INO) and National Youth Council of Ireland sit on the ESF monitoring committee.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

- A more explicit focus on poverty will be a challenge under ESF+. There needs to be a clear link between the ways the funds are invested and the national strategies relevant to the fight against poverty. There needs to be a more proactive engagement with anti-poverty organisations. To ensure more effective use of funds to combat poverty, consideration should also be given to how funding requirements help or hinder the ability of programme implementers to engage groups most at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
- The integration of FEAD into the ESF+ will be a real challenge. Both in terms of keeping a focus within the FEAD element on groups most at risk of poverty and exclusion and ensuring that the people who benefit from FEAD might also benefit from the wider inclusion supports and necessary accompanying measures that could be supported with ESF+ funds.
- While activation to the labour market will continue to be a priority for ESF+ there is a challenge to also invest more in the wider opportunities that ESF+ allows in relation to support for access to services and participation in the society and narrowing the distance to the labour market.
- In the past area-based anti-poverty strategies that allowed a holistic approach to the combat of poverty were greatly enhanced by use of EU Funds. There is a continuing challenge to use the ESF+ funds in a way that responds to the multiple problems faced by people experiencing poverty.
- Reducing the administrative burden associated with ESF funds would allow for more effective use of funds to combat poverty. This is particularly so given that ESF contributions are made as retrospective refunds to the Irish State, which don't necessarily get reinvested in the organisations/ programmes that took on the additional administrative burden required to make the ESF claim.

- In their present form, ESF reporting and audit trail requirements, which include multiple declaration forms, can act as a barrier to engaging more marginalised groups. For example, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants, and refugees, can be suspicious of official institutions, in some cases due to past experiences of discrimination and/or exclusion. Written forms can also be off-putting to individuals with lower levels of formal education and/or literacy needs. In such cases, even if one-to-one support is provided to fill out written forms, stigma associated with literacy needs (real or perceived) can act as a psychological barrier to engagement.
- The representatives from the Implementing body suggested consideration of an additional measure that could be applied to ensure more effective use of funds to combat poverty under ESF+. That would be to introduce financial rewards to recognise good work/practice. This would drive quality improvement, motivate those delivering particularly good work, and identify key learning for sharing across ESF funded programmes at a European level.

## LITHUANIA

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Lithuania has one multi-fund Operational Programme (OP) that brings together several key EU investment funds including boosting research and innovation, SME competitiveness, the shift to a low-carbon economy, the promotion of human capital, especially of young people. This OP also includes measures under Thematic Objective 9 on social inclusion and the EU ESF funding is in excess of 1.237 billion. The OP indicates that resources from the fund will also be used to ‘facilitate the transition from institutional to community-based care and improve access to social housing and quality of health care services for people at risk of poverty or social exclusion’. Investments to improve pupils’ achievement in general education are also expected to address social inclusion.

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

For public authorities the 20% earmarked for social inclusion and the identified investment priorities shaped their Partnership Agreement and Operational Programmes but it would need more evaluation and reflection to understand the impact of the changes. NGOs were not very aware of much change in the regulation and didn’t see much change in the practice. Actions are still focused on integration to the labour market and a continuation of the same measures as in the past and hoping for different results, was their general assessment. They were aware of the 20% earmarking for social inclusion and acknowledged that this did help to draw attention to the need to invest to combat social inclusion. However, in their view, there was not the necessary shift in the type of projects supported to make a real difference.

## PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

In general, the practices were related to support for labour market integration for groups experiencing exclusion. The investment priority on 'active inclusion' supported measures to enhance involvement of excluded persons from the labour market. Approximately 13.4 million euro was available for this measure. An important difference in relation to this measure was that the project promoters were exclusively NGOs. A distinct measure aimed at Roma inclusion to the labour market, with 1.1 million of investments, was also supported with ESF. ESF also invested in a measure managed by the 'ESF Agency' that provided 'incubator' and financial support to test new ideas that could respond and make a difference for excluded people. Support for Deinstitutionalisation was also made with investment from ERDF and ESF. For NGOs the approach which was almost exclusively on labour market integration was too limited and is not capable to respond to the diverse needs of people experiencing poverty and exclusion. They also point out that the support for deinstitutionalisation was more a move to smaller institutions, rather than a real investment in community and family-based services, independent living, and measures to prevent institutionalisation.

### PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

Measures to support the Active Inclusion Investment Priority included: **'Integration of socially excluded persons into the labour market'** (funds allocated – 13,2 million Euro), only NGOs could be applicants to deliver this measure and the **'Roma social integration'** measure (ESF – 1,1 million euro).

The activities supported under both measures were similar and included:

- motivation, personal needs assessment, developing and maintaining of social competences
- vocational guidance, information, and counseling
- basic skills training
- vocational training
- job skills training in the workplace
- mediation in seeking and keeping employment
- capacity building of the project staff.

Another measure for increasing social inclusion was the **'Alternative Investment Detector'**. The main goal of the measure is integration of socially vulnerable persons (socially excluded) into the labour market. This measure was implemented by the European Social Fund Agency. The project promoter invited organisations to develop, innovative, experimental approaches for new ways how to tackle social exclusion, to help socially vulnerable people to deal with their problems and help them to reintegrate into the society and the labour market. The aim was to invite organisations with ideas for making a real social change that could deliver positive results, to submit these ideas and if successful to receive support to further develop the ideas. A selection procedure involving a committee of experts, made up of representatives of NGOs, Vilnius University, European Social Fund Agency and Ministry of Social Security and Labour, evaluated, and selected the project ideas to develop further. After selection procedure organisations became project partners, they received project funding, and could receive incubator supports, such as mentor assistance, legal consultations (labor law, debts, etc.), consultations of social work experts, to test their ideas. If they succeeded with their ideas, they got further project funding for the implementation of their idea on a bigger scale.

Capacity Building Support: A call (**Initiatives for Increasing Public Intolerance of Corruption and Promoting Participation in Public Governance Processes**) was made for Capacity building support aimed at activating and increasing the quality of NGO participation in public governance. The supported activities were focused on strengthening the institutional capacity of NGOs to participate in public governance decision making.



It included two main supported activities:

- Preparation of proposals for public legislation (what they termed public management solutions) and presentation of the prepared proposals to the public and public institutions.
- Strengthening NGO representational competences that are necessary for the preparation and presentation of the proposals (eg training, participation in events).

The proposals made needed to include an analysis of the current situation and the issues addressed and the goal to be achieved, legal regulation principles or basic regulatory conditions and other necessary information.

The call included the following indicators:

- Monitoring result indicator: Prepared proposals for public legislation and submitted to the competent state or municipal institution.
- Impact indicator: Prepared and submitted proposals for public legislation on the basis of which public management decisions or draft public management decisions were made.

EAPN Lithuania were one of the successful applicants under the call and it supported their involvement in the preparation of the National Progress Plan by participating and submitting proposals. They also submitted proposals on the basis of which amendments have been adopted on debt recovery and the regulation of social services amongst other proposals.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

Anti-Poverty NGOs were significantly consulted on two calls for projects: programmes, 54+, and Integration of socially excluded people into the labour market. Some service provider NGOs were final beneficiaries receiving ESF funds to deliver services, but the funds are tied to a strict list of allowable expenditures, so it is hard to take the approach that is needed to address the complex problems faced by people experiencing poverty. EAPN Lithuanian did receive some funds to help make inputs from the perspectives of people and communities experiencing poverty into policy making and the shaping of ESF programmes. This was an innovative approach but so far it has not produced a real shift in the approach used and the projects funded.

Civil Society and anti-poverty NGOs were included on Monitoring committees, including the National NGO Coalition, and the Lithuanian Disability Forum. However, NGOs felt that this was a formal engagement, and the impact was minimal. They report, Monitoring Committees received presentation on the macroeconomic impact of the funds, with little or no presentations, or research, on the impact of the funds on poverty.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

- From the perspective of Managing Authorities, Project promoters and implementing agencies, the main challenge is the simplification of ESF administrative burden.
- For NGOs, there are still bureaucratic barriers to involvement that need to be overcome so that key actors who are needed to fight poverty and the people most in need of support, can benefit from ESF investments.
- You need to go beyond just a formal engagement of NGOs to invest in a real participation process. More involvement of NGOs not just at monitoring and evaluation level but in the design and implementation of on the ground measures is needed, to improve the quality of the actions and the engagement of the people experiencing poverty whom the actions aim to support.

- NGOs recognised that having the 20% ring fenced for social inclusion is good to draw attention to the issue, but they are strongly of the opinion that it needs to be accompanied by a focus on the quality of the programmes and projects supported to ensure that there is a clear focus on combating poverty.
- FEAD funding will now be part of ESF+ so it is very important to keep the focus of the fund on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. NGOs highlight that it has not been accessible for some people. Eligibility threshold varies across municipalities and in some of them it doesn't even reach the absolute poverty threshold (the size of the minimum consumption basket). Also, NGOs point out that bureaucratic procedures, collection of signatures and other requirements made it difficult for some people in need to receive support.
- You need to avoid the danger that ESF money just replaces national money and that ESF+ investments have a clear added value.
- There needs to be more flexibility in how ESF+ funds are spent to be able to try innovations that can address complex problems and allow the possibility that the innovations might fail.
- Need to make it easier to combine funds such as ESF, ERDF, and national funds.

## PORTUGAL

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Portugal has ten Operational Programmes under the ESF, including seven regional programmes. Each regional programme is expected to contribute to the thematic objective, social inclusion. In addition, there is a specific 'OP Social Inclusion and Employment'. This OP has a total investment of EUR 2.5 billion of which half is directed to promoting social inclusion and combating poverty and discrimination. The OP is primarily aimed at integration to the labour market and the OP aims at, *'implementing active inclusion measures, promoting equal opportunities, and providing better access to services for disadvantaged groups'*. 40,000 people with disabilities are expected to receive vocational education and 46,000 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are expected to receive support from the ongoing schools programme 'Programa Escolhas'.

Portugal is likely to exceed its expenditure to achieve about 22% spending for social inclusion

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

The set investment priorities, the common indicators, led to the programming under this period of ESF to be more top down than previous rounds of ESF. It seemed as if the programming needed to satisfy the investment priorities and the indicators rather than being built up from an analysis of needs to address social inclusion in Portugal and to develop indicators based on the needs identified.

The 20% earmarked for social inclusion led to an enormous increase in the amount of ESF funds dedicated to this priority. While this opened many new possibilities for investment it did shrink the ESF budget available for other important priority needs in Portugal, for example life-long-learning and adult education. To ensure draw down and a successful use of the extra investment, public authorities were often best placed to deliver the programmes and projects at the scale required. There was more room in this period for investments which hadn't got as stringent requirements in relation to the link to the labour market, this allowed new areas of work to be developed.

The enabling conditions, including the need for national policy frameworks and strategies did not make such a difference in Portugal as there was already a practice of linking ESF to national policy arrangements.

### PRACTICES IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

Like in other countries, in Portugal it would be difficult to distinguish within the broadly formulated TO9 what percentage of funds and which projects were specifically focussed on combating poverty. The national 'OP Social Inclusion and Employment' was an important programme that provided additional resources to less developed regions to support their efforts to combat exclusion, poverty, and discrimination. This support broadly speaking followed three lines: 1) maintaining support for approaches deemed useful from the previous round, mainly training and support to access the labour market for people experiencing disadvantage. 2) Investments in new areas for ESF in Portugal, such as anti-discrimination, domestic violence, and active ageing, and 3) supports for new types of actions such as support for independent living and actions to make third level education more accessible for groups

experiencing poverty, exclusion or discrimination. Investments and actions to improve the capacities of administrations to deliver better quality services, such as childcare service. In general terms, it was considered that there was a high concentration on actions to improve the situation of people with disabilities through the ESF funding for OP9.

In addition to this national OP there were seven regional OPs that included investments in relation to the TO9. A key activity within these OPs is the Local Contracts for Social Development Programme (see practice example below). The more developed regions tried within their allocations, to replicate the similar actions as supported in the less developed regions with support from the OP Social Inclusion and employment, from within their regional OP allocation.

It is also important to note that there was a call for proposals for capacity building activities for civil society actors, in previous rounds this support was for the social partners but in this round this support was open to designated social and civil society organisations.

EAPN Portugal reports that in this period of programming of the Structural Funds the possibilities for grassroots organisations working for the fight against poverty were less than previous periods. The areas of employment and vocational training, health, education, disability, and childcare, were areas that had investments that was directly linked to poverty and social exclusion, linked to the allocation of 20% of the ESF to the TO9. These actions were mainly addressed through projects promoted by public entities.

With the pandemic, EAPN recognises that concerns were focused on health and health issues and social entities felt the effects of the pandemic crisis on the daily lives of organisations (need to respond to more people, with other types of needs, including food, due to lack of employment). EAPN Portugal recognises that the type of support from operational programmes has in some cases been redirected to respond to the crisis. For EAPN Portugal, there was a lack of support for an empowerment and participation approach that engages people in poverty in collective engagement and in shaping the responses to their situation. For example, there were efforts to support Roma children to attend school but not clearly working with Roma to know how schools should adapt to be places of learning for Roma children.

## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

**MAVI (Support Model for an Independent Life)** is a pilot project of the Portuguese Government financed by the European Social Fund, to support people with disabilities or incapacity with the aim of promoting their self-determination. MAVI it's a program that provides personal assistance, intended to create conditions for people with disability or incapacity to be able to have an autonomous life, helping them to perform activities which they cannot perform by themselves, such as:

- support activities in the areas of hygiene, food, maintenance of health and personal care
- support activities in domestic assistance
- support activities for travel
- communication mediation activities
- support activities in the work context
- support activities for attending professional training
- support activities for attending higher education and research
- support activities in culture, leisure, and sport
- support activities in active job search
- activities to support the creation and development of social support networks
- activities to support participation and citizenship
- decision support activities, including the collection and interpretation of information necessary.

The activities are supported differently according to each person's needs, but it is always the people with disability or incapacity who, together with the Independent Life Support Centres (CAVI), define the level of support necessary to perform them. The support to these activities is formalised in the Individualised Personal Assistance Plan. MAVI relies on close articulation between Personal Assistants, the CAVI and the person with disability, who is the central figure of the program. The people eligible for this program must be aged 16 or over, and with a certified degree of disability of at least 60% (or with intellectual disability, autism, or mental illness) can benefit from personal assistance.

To operationalize these pilot projects, it was necessary to previously create CAVI's (Support Centres for Independent Living) which are the entities responsible for providing assistance to people with disabilities. With the European Social Fund, it is possible to finance these projects in their different aspects, such as:

- CAVI's running costs;
- Costs with personnel allocated to the operation, such as technical staff responsible for coordinating CAVI, as well as remuneration expenses of personal assistants;
- Transport expenses for staff linked to CAVI's;
- Expenses with the training activity of the personal assistants who will support the people with disabilities;
- Direct charges such as, the preparation, development, monitoring and evaluation of operations, expenses with the preparation of diagnoses of needs of the final recipients of support, etc;
- The general costs of the project, such as expenses necessary for the design, development, and management of the supported operation, including expenses with energy, water, communications, consumable materials, etc
- Expenses with the rental or amortization of equipment directly related to the operation, and the expenses with rent or amortization of the facilities where the operation takes place
- meetings, seminars, workshops, and dissemination actions.
- other activities

**The Local Contracts for Social Development Programme (CLDS Programme)** was created in 2007 with the objective to promote the social inclusion of population groups at higher levels of social isolation in defined territories. It seeks to deliver integrated approaches, using the agencies and resources available locally in a partnership approach, between public and private actors. CLDS are created in territories with the following profiles:

- a) territories especially affected by unemployment
- b) territories with critical situations of poverty, particularly child poverty
- c) territories with ageing populations
- d) territories severely affected by disasters.

CLDS are developed by private non-profit entities operating in the area of social development in a given intervention territory. These entities are selected by the Municipal Councils or by the Local Councils for Social Action (CLAS) and can apply in partnership with other public or private entities that also work in the area of social development and private non-profit entities that are part of CLAS provided that they are based in the intervention territory they apply for.

CLDS are funded according to the profile of the territory and the size of the technical teams, with funding limits varying between € 300,000 and € 700,000. Eligible expenses include the remuneration and costs of the CLDS technical team, direct costs with the purchase of goods and services, rents, leases, as well as costs for general overheads.

Examples of activities developed by CLDS

- Creation of support offices to prepare business plans, consolidate ideas and apply for funding, with programmes to promote entrepreneurial skills, business idea workshops, entrepreneurship workshops and information sessions on setting up companies.
- Workshop to stimulate local commerce and follow-up, legalization and certification of local craft and agricultural products.
- "On Wheels" – a service that will travel through all the parishes in the CLDS territorial area, in which diverse information will be made available, adjusted to the needs of people in situations of isolation/ social exclusion.

- Family empowerment - To raise awareness and continuously accompany vulnerable families, providing support and empowering them in daily family management, expenses and available resources, enabling them to acquire basic life skills.
- Mobilisation of the senior population, for the participation and consolidation of a common project in the territory covered, developing walks for seniors, promoting active and healthy ageing, carrying out occupational workshops with the elderly, to promote access to new technologies and communication with grandchildren around the world.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

NGOs do receive funds to implement parts of programmes, but it is the view of EAPN Portugal that there was less involvement of grassroots anti-poverty organisations than in previous rounds. They also report that there can be long delays, up to two years, in receiving funds for work done by NGOs. This is unsustainable for NGOs.

Managing Authorities point to the fact that Monitoring Committees are very large and that social organisations are present and active on these committees. Disability Organisations are particularly active in the view of Managing Authorities, and this partly reflects growing capacities in these organisations, thanks in some part from previous ESF support. Misericórdias, have a long history and an importance place in relation to the delivery of social services in Portugal. They continue to play this role and are active in the management and the delivery of ESF. The National Council for Social Economy (CNES) is also a very active organisation in relation to ESF.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+

- There is general recognition of the need for flexibility to identify the key programmes, measures and projects that need investment to deliver National strategies and policies to fight poverty. The three areas identified within the [Active Inclusion Recommendation 2008](#), access to adequate income, access to services and accessible employment, remain valid and are inter-linked and should remain part of the same programmes and actions to address inclusion. The flexibility within the ESF+ to support measures for broader inclusion in society as well as employment and for narrowing the distance to the labour market must be taken advantage of.
- The common indicators are not enough to shape the right actions to combat poverty, exclusion and discrimination. There needs to be specific indicators for this area and the indicators need to respond to the actions chosen as most needed to address inclusion rather than the actions having to fit the indicators.
- There is support for the idea that ESF should in the longer term be able to more directly support cash transfers (the so-called passive support measures) to achieve the long-held EU ambition to have adequate Minimum Income accessible in all EU Member States.
- For EAPN Portugal, there is a need to address practical implementation issues from previous rounds that makes it difficult to engage with ESF: excessive bureaucracy, excessive goals and measurable results for the social area, and project logic, that cause difficulties for drawing down the funds available and in implementing the programmes. They also highlight the need to guarantee that the financial management/financial monitoring of the projects are made without great delays. When there are delays in dispatch of refund requests or final balance requests this is really heavy for small organisations. They suggest that it may be necessary to reinforce the staff/teams responsible for following the ESF projects.
- EAPN Portugal also suggest that there is a great need to shift from formal engagement of stakeholders to guaranteeing that this involvement and participation of stakeholders is meaningful. This requires financial investment and engaging anti-poverty and social NGOs early in the design of programmes. They suggest it will be important to guarantee the participation of small NGOs, not

only in monitoring processes, but also in accessing to the funds. The next financing period and the Operational Programmes must allow the development of innovative and experimental projects to attend different dimensions of poverty and social exclusion. For that the regulations of the calls must allow some flexibility in the design of the project and activities and allow projects of sufficient duration to have the chance to be successful, while guaranteeing that the project is monitored, and the results are made visible. Where positive results are achieved the practices need to be sustained and mainstreamed. Developing more transparency, at the level of monitoring committees remains a challenge, to be clearer what their function are and how they can operate to effectively meet the function for which they are intended.

- Housing and homelessness, including the accommodation needs of Roma needs to be a focus of the ESF+ programmes. As well as addressing the needs of particular groups, people with disabilities, homeless, Roma, migrants, there is a need to strengthen area-based strategies and approaches for areas with high concentrations of people experiencing poverty and with poor access to services, employment, social and cultural activities.

## SPAIN

### OVERVIEW USE OF ESF FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Spain has one ESF national thematic operational programme dedicated to 'social inclusion and social economy' called (POISES). This programme builds on the 2007-2013 Operational Programme "Fight Against Discrimination" but has significant differences from the previous programme. The programme is primarily based on the activation of the most disadvantaged (groups of the population furthest away from the labour market and most at risk of discrimination, including women, single parents and young people, Roma and other ethnic minorities, migrants and returning emigrants, prisoners and ex-offenders, men and women with disabilities etc) into the labour market, with the possibility of support to participate in society. The programme also supports the development of the social economy. The programme aims not only at support for people at risk of discrimination but also includes support for awareness raising actions among employers and the general public. Two specific strands dedicated to social innovation and to transnational cooperation are also included in this programme. In the 2014-2020

period, a specific limited call for transnational cooperation was published where public and private partnership, including NGOs and employers, were engaged.

In addition, each of the ESF operational programmes in the 17 autonomous regions and the 2 autonomous cities of Spain, Ceuta and Melilla were required to dedicate at least 20% of the funding to actions to support poverty and social inclusion. The focus of the actions supported to address social inclusion was activation of vulnerable groups into the labour market. Support for access to services and for social integration was also foreseen.

It was expected that close to 25% of the ESF would be spent in relation to thematic objective 9 social inclusion.

### KEY ELEMENTS FROM THE REGULATION

The link to the Europe 2020 strategy and the poverty target were considered as important elements in the regulation to ensure a strong focus within the ESF investments on social inclusion. The thematic concentration including the 20% ring fenced for poverty, social inclusion and discrimination was considered vital. The investment priority including Roma people was important for ensuring a continued focus on Roma. The Youth Employment Initiative, investing in unemployed youth 'not in education or training', while not part of the TO9 investments counted for the 20% social inclusion earmarking, did reach out beyond the easier to reach youth.

### PRACTICE IN RELATION TO COMBATING POVERTY

While the broader scope of active inclusion, support to improve the systems for access to adequate income, access to employment and services and supports for participation in society were possible under the Operational Programmes, in general the focus both in the National programme 'Social inclusion and social economy', and the inclusion elements of the programmes in the autonomous regions, was primarily on activation to the labour market, with some exceptions. The case studies illustrate this reality. There was some delay in starting some of the actions under the inclusion strands in the programmes, this seems to be because of the inclusion of new actors in the implementing and beneficiary bodies who were not adequately supported to be ready for the required administrative arrangements, this led to some agreements of shifts in the content of the original design of the

programmes, leading to some loss of more innovative elements and a reduction in the amount originally foreseen for social inclusion elements.

Attention was drawn to the national OP called [POISES \(EL FONDO SOCIAL EUROPEO CON LA INCLUSIÓN SOCIAL Y LA ECONOMÍA SOCIAL\)](#). NGOs played a key role in the development of this OP, which operates in consolidated partnerships, between NGOs, private and public entities, to implement the activities of the OP. The practices under this programme were first developed in 1998 with support from the EU employment initiative INTEGRÁ and subsequently further developed and supported with ESF funds. It is a keyway that NGOs are engaged and have access to funds under ESF. This represented a continuation of practice and an important example of transfer of practice. This OP is based on three basic principles:

- Active inclusion so that all citizens, especially the most disadvantaged, can participate fully in society and have better options in the labour market.
- The social economy as a key element to counteract the negative repercussions of the current economic and social situation in Spain.
- The promotion of inclusive labour markets in order to reduce poverty rates and address the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

There are many NGOs involved in the delivery of the programme including, Caritas, Cepaim, ONCE, Red Cross and Fundación Secretariado Gitano.

At regional level, EAPN Spain, has not seen changes in regard to greater access to funding through ESF for anti-poverty and social NGOs. EAPN Spain draws attention to the fact that for the national OP POISES, calls are multiannual while under the regional OPs calls are mostly managed on an annual basis. EAPN Spain stresses the importance of a multiannual approach.

Spain has directed sustained attention to the transnational cooperation possibilities within ESF. In the current period (2014-2020) the Spanish Managing Authority, has launched two calls for proposals under the Transnational Priority Axis within the National OP on Social Inclusion and Social Economy (POISES). From the first round of calls in 2016 the following three transnational operations were selected to be implemented until 2019:

1. Secretariado Gitano Foundation to run **EUroma Network**, which intends to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the transnational cooperation to promote actions to make a real change in the lives of European Roma
2. Against Hunger Foundation to run **the European Social Innovation Network for Employment and Entrepreneurship**, aiming at promoting social innovation among social entities, companies, public administrations, etc., as a tool to create a more inclusive European labour market
3. Proyecto Hombre Association to organise a trans-national cooperation **Seminar to exchange experiences around social and labour inclusion of vulnerable people** suffering from social exclusion and/or drug abuse.

In the second round of calls (2019), the following transnational projects were selected to be implemented until October 2023:

1. **Across Nations** from Proyecto Hombre; is a joint proposal for social and labour insertion for people with addiction agreed with other European partners, which may be replicable and transferable to the different contexts and realities of the Member States.
2. **European social innovation network for inclusive employment and entrepreneurship** organised by Action Against Hunger.
3. **EUroma Network** the European Network on Roma Inclusion.
4. **Transnational network for social and labour inclusion in rural and transition areas**, from Santa María la Real Foundation, whose objective is to identify good practices and innovative projects that promote social and labour inclusion in rural areas and areas in transition, working to achieve their adaptation and transfer to the national context.

## PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

The ADELANTE programme (Red Cross Spain) **socio-labour integration opportunities for women from vulnerable groups, especially migrants**. The programme also includes a methodology to raise awareness on gender equality and equal opportunities among companies, professionals, and citizens. The predominant profile of women participating in the socio-labour integration part of the programme is that of migrant women (80%), although there are other types of participants such as women living in poverty, women in situations of gender-based violence and rural women. The ADELANTE programme consists of 3 interrelated lines:

- Itineraries of socio-labour integration for women in situation of vulnerability
- Advice and awareness-raising actions for companies aimed at implementing equality measures and further developing conciliation and co-responsibility, with special attention to men.
- Training for social intervention professionals on issues related to equality and masculinities, labour orientation with a gender perspective and training for social agents involved in the socio-labour insertion of migrant women.

The Adelante programme is pioneering the introduction of gender and intersectional perspective in the intervention with vulnerable groups, specifically with migrant women, especially in the methodology of socio-labour guidance. One of the most innovative action of the project is the specific psychological support in the itineraries of socio-labour integration. Psychosocial support is understood as an accompaniment through which the participation, empowerment and decision making of the person is sought. The psychological support aims at reinforcing the development of participants' capabilities and potential, integrating principles such as dignity, quality of life, mutual support, solidarity, with a gender approach and within the framework of human rights.

**Acceder** is a training and employment Programme focused on the Roma population and managed and delivered by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano. It aims at the inclusion of Roma into salaried employment through a holistic approach addressing all the factors that exclude them from the labour market. It provides:

- Professional training for Roma men and women tailored towards job offers made by companies.
- Adaption of mainstream employment and training services to make them more accessible to Roma.
- Generating protected employment opportunities and providing counselling for self-employment and business start-up.
- Awareness raising to counteract discrimination and prejudice experienced by Roma
- Pursuing policies to improve the living conditions of Roma and to guarantee equal access to goods and services.

Acceder was first developed in 1998 with support from the EU employment initiative INTEGRA and has since been further developed and upscaled with support from ESF. This is an important example of a good transfer of practice. Presently it operates in 14 regions in Spain with 63 employment teams.

**Work and Training Program - ACOL Line (SOC-TRFO ACOL)** is a Catalonian programme specifically addressed to non-EU migrants who are not in a regular/legal administrative situation. This programme offers a 12 month labour contract to migrants already living in Spain for 3 years, and therefore facilitates the labour and residence procedure in order to obtain their legal permission and become regular citizens. The Public Employment Service of Catalonia (SOC) subsidises employment contracts of 12 months duration and the training actions to be carried out during the contract and within working hours.

**The Emancipation Programme for Minors and Youngsters – EXTREMADURA** - under the social protection system, provides household facilities, together with educational, cultural, psychological, and emotional support, to prepare for independent living.



### **Reallocation of families suffering from persistent social and residential exclusion**

- Murcia Region is a multi-fund intervention; combining appropriate housing with support provided by ERDF and social accompanying measures funded by ESF budget. This programme also involved the coordination of different public services (dealing with social services and housing) and administrative governance levels (local and regional) and engagement of NGOs.

**Enhancing Public - Private Partnership:** The Ministry of Equality, Social Policies and Conciliation, together with the Andalusian Employment Service, are supported to work on the creation of a coordinated system for the construction of itineraries of socio-labour inclusion in disadvantaged areas, focused on people in situations of exclusion or social vulnerability. This new system aims to build bridges between the doors of access that citizens have to Social Services and Employment Services, in addition to providing continuity to the resources and benefits that both systems put at the service of people, with the ultimate goal of promoting their inclusion in the labour market. The engagement of NGO actors including Red Cross, the Don Bosco Foundation, and the Surge Federation, is considered vital due to the work they carry out in these areas. This alliance with the Third Sector aims to allow an integrated work model for the population at risk of exclusion or social vulnerability to improve their chances of integrating into the labour market.

### **INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY NGOS**

NGOs are active with ESF. However, EAPN Spain reports that with the exception of the active engagement of NGOs, at all stages, including accessing funds and delivering projects and programmes, in the national OP POISES, the participation of NGOs at the national level, has been erratic. The changes in Government have contributed to this reality. The participation is limited to some meetings, but there is no real consultation, and the points of view of the NGOs are rarely taken into account.

NGOs are engaged in Monitoring Committees, for example, EAPN Spain and CERMI (A Representative Committee of Disability Organisations) participate in almost all the Monitoring Committees of all the national and regional OPs in Spain. However, EAPN Spain reports that in many regions the engagement is minimal and lacks transparency. In many regions the monitoring committee meetings were very infrequent, not participatory, with just exposition of figures, without real dialogue or consultation.

### **CHALLENGES FOR THE ESF+**

- Build on what worked well including the historically good experience of cooperating with NGOs in the POSES programme and develop such practice more widely. Engagement of Social and anti-poverty NGOs in all stages of implementation of all ESF OPs, including building and strengthening the quality of the engagement on Monitoring Committees, remains a challenge.
- Regional authorities need to provide more assistance to the Implementing Bodies in the beginning to ensure the programmes can be implemented as planned, in order to achieve their objectives. In general, there is a need to invest more in the capacity building of all the bodies involved in ESF delivery.
- Measures supporting labour market activation need to address all three pillars of the Active Inclusion Recommendation. There is also the need for more focus on measures aimed at access to goods and services, participation in the society, narrowing the distance to the labour market. Such measures, while valuable in their own right, are often prerequisites for successful labour market activation measures.
- Simplification is still a challenge, only the most expert organisations can be involved.
- There is the need to recognise the length of time needed for successful interventions
- Linking targeted and pilot initiatives to mainstream measures remains a challenge to ensure the sustainability of successful practices. There is also the need to upscale what worked well and innovative actions.
- Maintaining and strengthening the focus on marginalised groups experiencing poverty and discrimination remains a challenge.



# KEY FINDINGS WHICH CAN INFLUENCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ESF+

With the adoption of the ESF+ Regulation already done some lessons learned from the 2014-2020 round will be more theoretical as they go beyond the scope of what will be possible within the new regulation. However, as this is a continuous circle of reflection, action, adjustment, reflection, it can be useful to mention learning that may not be possible in the 2021-2027 period but may be in the future. However, many of the findings can influence the implementation in the ESF+ period.

**Key finding 1) Given the size of the ESF investment, the potential and needed links to National Funds and other EU Funds, it is not possible to present in a short report a comprehensive overview and assessment of the impact of ESF investments for the 2014-2020 period on combating poverty. However, this cannot be allowed to prevent the effort to highlight key issues and learnings from the use of ESF in this period:**

The 2021 European Commission's evaluation of the use of the ESF to support employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education and training, summarised in the literature review in this study highlights, that operations under the 'ESF Thematic Objective 9, "promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination operations", are financed by 145 operational programmes. They account for a total planned expenditure (including EU and national co-financing) of approximately EUR 31.3 billion (of which EUR 21.4 billion is EU funding). This corresponds to about one quarter of total ESF funding'. In addition, it needs to be noted for the effective use of ESF it needs to be combined or relate to National Funds and in some instances, with other EU Funds -ERDF, FEAD, AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) or EFSI (European Fund for Strategic Investment – EFSI).

Making an assessment on the impact of ESF investments on combating poverty is further complicated by the reality that poverty is just part of the Thematic Objective 9, and the information is not gathered to separate out the investments to combat poverty as distinct from promoting social inclusion and combating discrimination. While it would mostly be the case that people experiencing poverty are also experiencing exclusion and discrimination and it is important to integrate the fight against exclusion and discrimination into combating poverty, it is not the case that all people experiencing exclusion and/or discrimination are also experiencing poverty.

For these reasons and because it was never an objective of this report, this report cannot give a comprehensive overview and assessment of the impact of ESF investment on combatting poverty. These realities, also make the case for why it will be essential to consciously, programme, monitor, report, share practices and evaluate, the extent to which investments under ESF+ are really tackling poverty and are really meeting the needs of people in poverty, including people in extreme situations of poverty and exclusion.

**Key finding 2) There is a great variation in the efforts made in the different countries to focus investments under ESF for combating poverty. While some progress was made in linking ESF investments to the implementation of integrated anti-poverty strategies and frameworks the full potential of this approach was far from realised. In almost all countries there is a need for much greater efforts to focus ESF investments on people experiencing poverty. However, there is evidence of the wider use of the funds in this period to go beyond labour market activation measures and address poverty and social exclusion in a more holistic way (access to essential goods and services, fostering participation in the world of work and in society) as allowed under the Regulation. There is also evidence that children and older people were better included in this round. There are examples of labour market activation that included a more holistic approach and focused on the quality of the employment. There is also evidence that ESF makes an important contribution to combating poverty:**

In doing this study it is clear there is a great variation in the efforts made in different countries to focus investments under ESF on combating poverty. While some progress was made in linking ESF investments to the implementation of integrated anti-poverty strategies and frameworks the full potential for this approach was far from fully realised. In almost all countries there is a need for much greater efforts to focus ESF investments on people in poverty and/or experiencing deprivation. Implementation rules that exclude people in extreme situations of poverty need to be rethought. However, there is evidence of the wider use of the funds in this period to go beyond measures to support activation to the labour market and address poverty and social exclusion in a more holistic way (access to essential goods and services, fostering participation in society) as allowed under the Regulation. It is important to note that such actions as well as being valuable in themselves, can also contribute to people's ability to access employment, so they have a double value. There is also evidence that children and older people were better included in this round. Activation to the labour market remains an important focus for ESF however it must include the focus on the quality of the employment so that it can lift people out of poverty and improve their wellbeing. Labour market activation measures should follow the active inclusion approach

and support as part of the same measures, access to good and services and adequate incomes. There were investments under ESF in this period taken this approach, but this needs to become the norm when investing in labour market activation.

There is evidence that ESF makes an important contribution to the fight against poverty, exclusion, and inequalities. The same report as mentioned under key finding one, argues that 'ESF support to social inclusion has contributed to progress made towards achieving the Europe 2020 target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty. Although the extent to which TO9 operations contributed to this progress cannot be directly assessed, evidence on the scale and type of results generated by ESF support to TO9 suggests that the contribution was positive. In total, more than 3 million positive results were reported in terms of engagement in job search, participation in education and training and accessing employment including self-employment'. The same report also suggests that 'evidence on whether ESF support for social inclusion reached the most vulnerable populations with the greatest needs is mixed. The assessment identified the risk of 'creaming' in TO9 operations, i.e., targeting less vulnerable people with less complex needs who can get better results'.

This report can only give some snap shots of the broad array of actions to combat poverty that were supported, it cannot give a comprehensive picture. We know that in Finland alone there were 516 projects under the ESF line for, promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. However, without undermining concerns about how the funds are used in some instances, or questioning that the funds could be used better, there is evidence to say, that ESF makes an important contribution to combating poverty and that the ESF investments have improved the situation for millions of people living in the EU Member States who are in, or have experienced, poverty.

In the future, there would need to be systems put in place that would enable a clear monitoring of the impact of the ESF+ in relation to the 'At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROPE)<sup>2</sup>', which will be the main indicator to monitor the EU 2030 poverty target, set out in the action plan to follow up the European Pillar of Social Rights.

<sup>2</sup> At risk of poverty or social exclusion, abbreviated as AROPE, corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. People are included only once even if they are in more than one of the situations mentioned above. The AROPE rate is the share of the total population which is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. It is the main indicator to monitor the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion and was the headline indicator to monitor the EU 2020 Strategy poverty target. (Source, Eurostat Statistics explained)

**Key finding 3) The ex-ante conditionality to link ESF investments for combating poverty, fostering inclusion, and tackling discrimination to National and Regional Strategies and Policy Frameworks has been a positive development and helps to identify the added value from ESF investments:**

There is a necessity to avoid that ESF is used to finance ordinary interventions that should be financed by national budgets. The ex-ante conditionality to link ESF investments to national and regional, anti-poverty and inclusion strategies and policy frameworks, helps to ensure that the investments are not ad-hoc, but linked to these strategies and policy frameworks. This also helps to see what the appropriate added value from ESF investments should be. ESF should mainly be used to test innovative and evidence-based projects, to scale up previous successful practices, to develop essential mainstream programmes where they do not already exist and act as a trigger to lever new national, regional, or local funding for these programmes and to strengthen the infrastructures and the capacities of all the actors involved to deliver together the national, regional, or local integrated poverty strategies and policy frameworks.

Linking the investments in the operational programmes to national policy frameworks and relevant strategies, will also secure a better analytical underpinning for the investments, if all the appropriate actors (those experiencing poverty, the organisations working on the ground, academics, policy makers, local and regional authorities, representative political structures.....) are involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the strategies. Similarly, the linking of the Funds, to the Europe 2020 Strategy, the follow up semester process and country specific recommendations, the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, helps to bring coherence to the ESF investments.

**Key finding 4) The focus on poverty can get lost within the broad framing of Thematic Objective 9 and the linked Investment Priorities in the ESF Regulation:**

Within the very broad framing of Thematic Objective 9 and the linked investment priorities, it is very difficult to clearly distinguish which projects are specifically directed at tackling poverty. To a certain extent every employment project related to someone who is unemployed, could be considered an anti-poverty action. This makes it more important that there is a conscious effort to ensure projects under social inclusion, include those with a clear focus on combating poverty, in terms of reducing income poverty, increasing access to essential services, inclusion in employment through quality jobs, and facilitates active participation in society.

On several occasions during the research when asked the question about how the ESF is tackling poverty, respondents began by speaking about the FEAD programme. It was as if FEAD was the poverty fund and ESF was the inclusion fund. This highlights that a more explicit focus on poverty will be a challenge under ESF+. The integration of FEAD into the ESF+ will be a real challenge. Both in terms of keeping a focus within the FEAD element on groups experiencing severe disadvantage and ensuring that the people who benefit from FEAD also benefit from the wider inclusion supports and necessary accompanying measures that should be supported with ESF+ funds. The special efforts made with FEAD funding to reach out to people in poverty is a good practice and an indication of what needs to happen under ESF+.

To ensure a more effective use of ESF to combat poverty under a broad social inclusion objective, consideration should be given to how funding requirements help or hinder the ability of programme implementers to engage groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion and to ensure that integrated approaches that tackle income poverty, access to services and participation are promoted more effectively. The design of operational programmes and calls for projects must be based on the actions needed to tackle poverty and on the needs of target groups. As women have higher rates of poverty and often carry the burden of poverty more than men, there needs to be a clear gender analysis underpinning the implementation of ESF. To maintain a focus on the main groups at risk of poverty, there is a need to ensure actions in ghettos, disadvantaged geographical areas, both rural and urban, while maintaining and developing a focus on target groups such as: homeless, Roma and Travellers, migrants, undocumented third country nationals, mobile EU

citizens who experience discrimination and exclusion, people in institutional care, long term unemployed, people with disabilities, single parent families, LGBTI people experiencing poverty, indigenous minorities. Promoting investment in children in or at risk of poverty is enhanced under the new regulation and this should enable strengthening practices developed in this area in the current round and during the ESF+ implementation period. There is the need to recognise the length of time needed for successful interventions with groups experiencing poverty and exclusion.

There were several responses that indicated that the common indicators are not enough to shape the right actions to combat poverty, exclusion, and discrimination. There needs to be specific indicators for this area and the indicators need to respond to the actions chosen as most needed to address poverty and exclusion rather than the actions having to fit the indicators. Responding to this would need to allow the use of qualitative indicators for different fields of operations, to enable measuring soft outcomes in social inclusion operations and going beyond indicators that only focus on employability.

There was the clear message from the research that having the 20% ring fenced for social inclusion, poverty and discrimination, was good to draw attention to these issues and resulted in greater investment of ESF in these areas. The ring fencing of 25% in the ESF can only strengthen these developments. However, there was a strong shared opinion that it is not only the size of the budget that matters, but the quality of the programmes and projects supported, to ensure that they contribute to the reduction of poverty and the implementation of effective integrated antipoverty strategies.

**Key finding 5) The full potential within the ESF Regulation (2014-2016) for a more holistic approach to combating poverty has not been fully utilised:**

The main focus of the use of ESF in the 2014-2020 remained on labour market activation measures, however, the opportunity to focus actions to address poverty within a wider social inclusion perspective was developed in the current period but the research would indicate the potential for this approach was not fully utilised. The scope for such an approach is even more favourable under the ESF+ regulation. While labour market activation will continue to be a priority for ESF+ there is a need for flexibility to identify the key programmes, measures and projects that can deliver strategies and policies to fight poverty. The three areas identified within the [Active Inclusion Recommendation 2008](#), access to adequate income, access to services and accessible employment, remain valid and are inter-linked and should remain part of the same operational programmes to address poverty and inclusion. The flexibility within the ESF+ to support measures for broader inclusion in society as well as employment and for narrowing the distance to the labour market must be taken advantage of.

**Key finding 6: An empowerment and capabilities approach to underpin ESF investments to combat poverty is underdeveloped.**

From anti-poverty NGOs there was often a response that there were actions for people experiencing poverty but often not developed together with people experiencing poverty and a general absence of an empowering or capacity building approach. However, the example of actions to combat the exclusion of people with disabilities, in a number of countries, indicated a way forward in this regard and that 'the 'nothing about us, without us' principle, is having impact. This is especially the case where organisations involving people with disabilities have developed capacities to operate effectively in complex operational fields such as the ESF. It should be noted that in some countries this capacity has been developed, at least in part, with support from ESF.

While the regulation for ESF in the 2014-2020 period required the engagement of all relevant actors, which should include people experiencing poverty and the organisations in which they participate, and the possibilities to use capacity building funds for the involvement of such organisations was there, this element remains under funded, if funded at all. A clear Investment Priority for participation of people experiencing poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, would be needed to ensure the full attention to this essential element for combating poverty. However, the potential under the ESF+ Regulation should be fully exploited to support an empowerment and capabilities approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

**Key finding 7) Access to ESF by social and anti-poverty NGOs, in the framework of the calls in the field of social inclusion and combating poverty, is still very limited in most countries:**

NGOs suggest that there is a great need to shift from formal engagement of stakeholders to guaranteeing that this involvement and participation of stakeholders is meaningful. This requires financial investment and engaging anti-poverty and social NGOs early in the design of programmes. They suggest it will be important to guarantee the participation of small NGO's, not only in monitoring processes, but also in accessing the funds. For the next financing period the Operational Programmes must allow the development of innovative and experimental projects to attend different dimensions of poverty and social exclusion. For that the regulations of the calls must allow some flexibility in the design of the project and activities and allow projects of sufficient duration to have the chance to be successful, while guaranteeing that the project is monitored, and the results are made visible.

The level of access to ESF by Social NGOs and grassroots anti-poverty organisations, varies a lot across the Member States analysed. Anti-Poverty NGOs identify the following main difficulties in accessing the ESF:

- participating in ESF projects is still considered too difficult, due to the complexity of the application and reporting processes, delays in payment, excessive bureaucratisation of ESF procedures
- in some countries, NGOs engaged in fighting poverty and social exclusion still see, even in active inclusion, an imbalance in favour of labour market activation measures, at the expense of measures that seek to provide a multi-dimensional and more holistic response. Vocational training institutes, employment services, and work integration social enterprises, are best placed to respond to this labour market activation approach, leaving little space to NGOs that take a wider perspective of reaching out, not only to individuals but also families and communities.

**Key finding 8) Ensuring the sustainability of successful actions and projects supported by ESF and upscaling and mainstreaming these projects, continues to be a key challenge:**

The ESF+ funds can be focused on testing innovations that can address complex problems; this must allow for the possibility that the innovations might fail. ESF funds can also be used to upscale successful experiments and improve the infrastructure to deliver national policy frameworks. ESF can also contribute to developing essential mainstream programmes where they do not already exist and act as a trigger to lever new national, regional, or local funding. The links between ESF, other EU Funds and national budgets must be made more transparent. There is a need to make it easier to combine funds such as ESF, ERDF. Ultimately, the goal is to integrate proven successful approaches into mainstream funded programmes, strengthening the impact, analytical bases, and efficiency of the mainstream programmes and the feedback cycle.

Avoiding the danger that ESF money just replaces national money is a constant challenge for those responsible for the ESF Funds. As pointed out above under key finding 3 ex-ante conditionality linking investments to key strategies and national policy frameworks can help in this regard. This link to national strategies and policy frameworks should also assist to upscale and mainstream successful innovations.

Knowledge of previous rounds, both individuals who have worked through several funding periods and institutional memory, are very important for building on past lessons and ensuring continuity and sustainability. This is true across all the actors who engage in ESF, but it is particularly true for Managing and Programming authorities, who have to negotiate, and interact with, the European Commission and Parliament representatives, Ministries and National and Regional Parliaments, to arrive at Partnership Agreements, Operational Programmes and calls for proposals as well as monitor and evaluate the use of the Funds. Fortunately, there are many such people engaged who have contributed greatly to the success of ESF. It is necessary in many countries to reinforce the staff/teams responsible for following the ESF projects and invest in their training to be able to do the work effectively. This continuity in personnel can also assist with follow up of previous actions and mainstreaming of successful innovations.

**Key finding 9) Partnership, as reflected in the Partnership Principle in the ESF Regulation, is essential for successful actions to combat poverty. Attention needs to shift from formal compliance to investment in the quality of the partnerships and building the capacities of all the relevant partners:**

Effective and well-functioning partnerships are essential for a successful delivery of ESF to combat poverty. There is a wealth of experiencing in relation to partnership from the current and previous rounds that can be built on to develop further partnership work in the use of ESF. The code of conduct on partnership is an excellent tool to facilitate this work. However, while countries respect the formal requirement for partnership, there needs now, to be much greater attention to the quality of partnership and the engagement of stakeholders.

This needs to be achieved by better involving different actors in all stages of the process: the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, stages. It needs to be recognised that the participation of people experiencing poverty and the organisations in which they participate, is essential to meeting the needs of the target groups and communities – particularly those experiencing poverty and the most disadvantaged groups. Financial investments will be needed for this strengthened partnership work to become a reality, including investment in the processes that allows the collective engagement of people experiencing poverty, and investment in identified employment positions (roles for experts by experience) in the various bodies that have a role to play in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ESF. Covid-19 responses showed that with online meetings and new technologies we can enable a greater participation of different actors in the implementation and monitoring of ESF funding. There is a need to build on the learnings from this practice.



Programmes and operations on tackling persistent poverty should not be the responsibility of one single institution, but they should be based on cooperation between different institutions and organisations. The promotion of interdepartmental work (not just employment departments, but also social welfare and inclusion, anti-discrimination, justice, education, housing, health...) and multi-actor collaborations/partnerships are necessary. Adequate levels of human and institutional resources are needed to achieve effective operational programme implementation, and effective partnership. There is a need to further invest in capacity building for all the actors involved in ESF in MCs and in accessing and delivering ESF projects effectively. Stronger cooperation between all the NGOs concerned by the ESF would be advantageous for engagement of NGOs and ensuring better outcomes.

Cross country comparisons and transnational learning can also contribute to improved partnership working. Monitoring and reporting on the operation of partnerships need to be strengthened to reflect the essential role of partnership in combating poverty, exclusion, and discrimination.

**Key finding 10) While progress has been made on simplification and reducing the administrative burden in relation to implementing ESF, further improvements are needed.**

Reducing the administrative burden in relation to the ESF continues to be an issue constantly raised. The relationship between ESF regulations and guidance, national and regional competencies and regulations, the difficulties to respect regulations governing different funding sources that could be more effective when combined, inevitably means this is a difficult area to address. However, it does seem that some significant progress has been made in this and previous rounds that can be built on in areas such as: combined regulatory requirements for the set up and operation of the monitoring systems, the definition of simplified cost options, duplications of controls and compliance with state aid regulations.

Despite the progress made, only the most expert organisations can be involved. There remains the need to address practical implementation issues from previous rounds that makes it difficult to engage with ESF: excessive bureaucracy, excessive goals and measurable results for the social area, and project logic, that cause difficulties for drawing down the funds available, and in implementing the programmes. There is also the need to guarantee that the financial management/financial monitoring of the projects are made without great delays.

It was suggested that in their present form, ESF reporting and audit trail requirements, which include multiple declaration forms, can act as a barrier to engaging more marginalised groups. For example, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants and refugees, can be suspicious of official institutions, in some cases due to past experiences of discrimination and/or exclusion. Written forms can also be off-putting to individuals with those with lower levels of formal education and/or literacy needs. In such cases, even if one-to-one support is provided to fill out written forms, stigma associated with literacy needs (real or perceived) can act as a psychological barrier to engagement. It was also pointed out that, there needs to be more flexibility in relation to the indicators for addressing poverty and inclusion so that the indicators follow the need, rather than the needs having to match the indicators. The importance for social inclusion programmes of having indicators other than those related to employability has been stressed on several occasions.

For programmes under ESF, a relevant part of the administrative burden for ESF is generated at programme level by the process known as gold-plating<sup>3</sup>. Addressing this issue is key to simplification. While it takes a great investment of time to find effective ways to reduce the administrative burden associated with ESF funds, it is worth it, as it would allow for more effective use of funds to combat poverty.

**Key finding 11) Communication, transparency and mutual learning can be further developed to ensure more knowledge is available and that the impact ESF investments have on combating poverty is better known, and to increase public confidence that the funds are properly used:**

More should be done to promote the visibility and transparency of ESF support. The fact that ESF-supported actions bring about changes beyond employment and qualifications, needs to be better showcased. The Reports that are easily accessible are important, but the 'annual reports on the implementation of Operational Programmes with reference to European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative', often contain mainly figures that are not easy to interpret and the 'Citizen Report' is often extremely general. A third annual public report, or an adaptation of the citizen report, to provide information aimed at general practitioners who engage with ESF as part of their work or campaigns is needed. To achieve this an improvement in statistical databases is needed, more timely availability of data is crucial to provide robust evidence on the impacts of ESF interventions. Independent expert evaluations that can provide clearer information on the total numbers of targeted groups and the numbers of people addressed by the actions implemented with the help of ESF and the extent to which these actions really take people out of poverty, would also help with this task.

Developing more transparency at the level of monitoring committees remains a challenge, to be clearer what their function are, what decisions they make, who is involved, steps taken to ensure active participation, and how they can operate to effectively meet the function for which they are intended, all need attention.

Mutual learning at regional, national, and trans-national levels play an important role in developing knowledge, ideas, practice exchanges, in relation to ESF. Investment of time and finances in these exchanges continues to be important for ensuring improvements in practice and for mutual understanding of the similar challenges and different realities, in the different countries and regions. It is also the base for building a European Union based on solidarity and common values and principles.

<sup>3</sup> 'gold-plating' is a term often used to describe, in the context of the implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs), the administrative supplementary requirements and burdens imposed on beneficiaries by the ESIF national and sub-national authorities

**Key finding 12) More ambition and urgency in relation to combating poverty, learning the lessons from the multiple crises of the past years, and recognising that there will be no successful green or digital transition without greater social cohesion is vital to build a sustainable future:**

The Europe 2020 anti-poverty target proved to be important for focusing attention on poverty and for ensuring ESF included an investment priority on inclusion and combating poverty and all forms of discrimination. However, the target and the strategy were not ambitious enough. For example, the goal was already met when it was set in some countries.

Subsequent crises: financial, employment, social, environmental and health have shown that countries with less poverty and more equality, and with stronger safety nets, are better placed to withstand the worst impacts of such crises. It is also known that there will not be a green transition without concrete measures to prevent negative social impacts and to promote greater social cohesion and that the links to the fight against poverty are clearly linked to successful measures to address the climate and environmental crisis for example fighting energy poverty through increased provision of energy efficient social housing. All this leads to the conclusion that the time for more ambition and urgency for the fight against poverty is now. The EU 2030 poverty reduction target must be seen as an essential element of meeting the climate and environmental targets. ESF+ can play an essential role in delivering the EU 2030 poverty target and means to measure the impact ESF+ plays to meet that target must be put in place.

Responding to the impact of Covid-19, has shown that the EU can cooperate and go further than was ever imagined in addressing severe situations and threats to the wellbeing of EU citizens and residents. Now is not the time to turn back from these ambitious approaches but to build on these practices, to really achieve a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and building sustainable societies and a sustainable world. ESF+ has an important role to play in this. Two ideas which emerged from this research that need consideration are:

- The case to allow ESF to cover social infrastructures was deemed important. While it is possible to have multi-fund OPs, it is proving very difficult to finance projects with both ESF and ERDF. To combine ESF and ERDF, is seen as needing two separate calls and it is necessary to select the same beneficiaries in both calls, thus going against transparency and sound management.
- There is support for the idea that ESF should be able to more directly support cash transfers (the so-called passive support measures) to achieve the long-held EU ambition to have adequate minimum income accessible in all EU Member States.

Such ideas would need increased budgets for ESF so would need new political agreements and adapted regulations, in addition to these ideas, other ideas of how to infuse ESF with the ambition and urgency with which the EU responded to Covid-19, need to be discussed, agreed and acted upon, if ESF and the EU is truly to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty.



# REGULATION FOR THE PERIOD 2021-2027

To transform the key findings and lessons learned from the 2014-2020 period into recommendations for the 2021-2027 ESF+ period, it is necessary to take account of the revised regulation. In this section the key elements of the ESF+ Regulation in relation to combating poverty and social exclusion are outlined. A key change is the shift in the focus of the now 25% ringfenced for social inclusion policies (previously it was 20% for promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination), and from the 3 investment priorities of 2014-2020 to the five specific objectives for the 2021-2027 period.

## ESF+ REGULATION FOR THE PERIOD 2021-2027

### THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY AND DELIVERY OF THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS

Article 3.1 of the ESF+ Regulation sets out as a general objective of the ESF+ and the methods of implementation that, 'The ESF+ aims to support Member States and regions to achieve high employment levels, fair social protection and a skilled and resilient workforce ready for the future world of work, as well as inclusive and cohesive societies aiming to eradicating poverty and delivering on the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights'

### EARMARKING 25% OF ESF+ FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

Article 7.4 of the of the ESF+ Regulation sets out that Member States shall allocate at least 25% of their ESF+ resources for the social inclusion policy area to the five specific objectives (h) to (l) identified in Article 4 (1) of the Regulation:

(h) fostering active inclusion with a view to promoting equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability, in particular for disadvantaged groups;

- (i) promoting socio-economic integration of third-country nationals, including migrants;
- (j) promoting the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people;
- (k) enhancing equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, including services that promote the access to housing and person-centred care including healthcare; modernising social protection systems, including promoting access to social protection, with a particular focus on children and disadvantaged groups; improving accessibility including for persons with disabilities, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services;
- (l) promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children.

### PARTNERSHIP

The partnership Principle is reflected in Article 9 which states:

1. Member States shall ensure meaningful participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in the delivery of employment, education and social inclusion policies supported by the ESF+ strand under shared management.
2. Member States shall allocate an appropriate amount of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management in each programme to capacity building of the social partners and civil society organisations, including in the form of training, networking measures, and strengthening of the social dialogue, and to activities jointly undertaken by the social partners.

## **INTEGRATION OF FEAD INTO ESF+**

Article 4 (1) sets out the specific objective (m) which integrates FEAD into the ESF+ and allows for: addressing material deprivation through food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived persons, including children, and providing accompanying measures supporting their social inclusion. Article 7 (5) sets out that, Member States shall allocate at least 3 % of their resources of the ESF+ for this specific objective.

## **CHILD GUARANTEE**

Article 7 (3) sets out the investments from ESF+ needed for the child guarantee and states that, Member States shall allocate an appropriate amount of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management for the implementation of the Child Guarantee through targeted actions and structural reforms to tackle child poverty under the specific objectives set out in Article 4(1), points (f) and (h) to (l). It also states that: Member States that had an average rate above the Union average of children of less than 18 years old at risk of poverty or social exclusion for the period between 2017 and 2019, on the basis of Eurostat data, shall allocate at least 5 % of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management to support targeted actions and structural reforms to tackle child poverty as set out in the first subparagraph.

## **TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Article 15 enables ESF+ investments to be used to support transnational cooperation actions under any of the specific objectives set out in Article 4(1).

## **INDICATORS**

Article 17 (1) states that: Programmes benefitting from general support from the ESF+ strand under shared management shall use common output and result indicators, as set out in Annex I to monitor progress in implementation. The programmes may also use programme-specific indicators.

## THE COMMON PROVISIONS REGULATION (CPR) FOR THE 2021-2027 PERIOD

The common provisions regulation article 5 (d) includes in the policy objectives to be supported: a more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. Annex 4 of the Common Provisions regulation on thematic enabling conditions applicable to ESF+ makes the following requirements in relation to the specific objectives covered by the 25% earmarking for social inclusion policies.

The existence of a national or regional strategic policy or legislative framework for social inclusion and poverty reduction is in place that includes:

- 1 Evidence-based diagnosis of poverty and social exclusion, including child poverty, in particular as regards equal access to quality services for children in vulnerable situations as well as homelessness, spatial and educational segregation, limited access to essential services and infrastructure, and the specific needs of vulnerable people of all ages.
- 2 Measures to prevent and combat segregation in all fields, including social protection, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services for vulnerable people, including migrants and refugees.
- 3 Measures for the shift from institutional to family- and community-based care.
- 4 Arrangements for ensuring that its design, implementation, monitoring and review is conducted in close cooperation with relevant stakeholders, including social partners and relevant civil society organisations.

Annex 4 also requires that National Roma inclusion strategic policy framework are in place that includes:

- 1 Measures to accelerate Roma integration, and prevent and eliminate segregation, taking into account the gender dimension and situation of young Roma, and sets baseline and measurable milestones and targets.
- 2 Arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and review of the Roma integration measures,
- 3 Arrangements for the mainstreaming of Roma inclusion at regional and local level.
- 4 Arrangements for ensuring that its design, implementation, monitoring, and review is conducted in a close cooperation with the Roma civil society and all other relevant stakeholders, including at the regional and local levels

The CPR also introduces for the first time, a single rulebook with aligned implementation rules, for the 7 shared management funds (European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy). It is hoped this will be a significant contribution to simplification.





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ESF+

To derive lessons from the 2014-2020 ESF period and transform them to recommendations for the implementation of the ESF+ 2021-2027 will require the collective reflection of the many key actors necessary for the successful use of ESF+ investments to combat poverty. No one person or actor, could ever have enough perspective to do this work adequately. The findings in this report and the recommendations can, at best, stimulate or contribute to reflections and discussions amongst the various actors whose experience is needed to ensure a successful implementation of the many elements of ESF delivery. This includes expertise in interpretation of the regulation, programme design, drafting inclusive calls, implementation of projects, poverty monitoring, indicators, information provision, targeted evaluation. The recommendations that follow seek to transform the key findings of this report into recommendations. They are offered in the hope that they can contribute ideas for the reflections needed across all the actors, that will play a role in the successful use of ESF+ to combat and eliminate poverty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

### 1. **To ensure a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives identified for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policy:**

The Commission will need to ensure that the indicators used, the monitoring and reporting arrangements, the Partnership Agreements, Operational Programmes, the practices highlighted, information dissemination, and the necessary evaluations, include a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policies.

2. **To ensure consistent guidance for the implementation of the ESF+ that encourages the holistic and integrated response to combating poverty that is possible under the ESF+ Regulation:** The integrated approach recognised under the Active Inclusion Recommendation (2008): access to goods and services, access to adequate and enabling incomes, and inclusive employment, remains valid. The Commission will need to ensure that this integrated approach and the wider holistic approach needed to ensure participation in society as well as in the world of employment, is possible under projects supported under each specific objective. It will be a step backwards, if the individual elements of the integrated approach are dealt with separately under the specific objective that seems the most relevant to that element. For instance the specific objective: *'enhancing equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, including services that promote the access to housing and person-centred care including healthcare; modernising social protection systems, including promoting access to social protection, with a particular focus on children and disadvantaged groups; improving accessibility including for persons with disabilities, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services'* needs not only to support actions that address access to goods and services, but also within the same projects, support actions to assist in access to employment and participation in society and to contribute to actions to ensure adequate incomes. Likewise, the specific objective, *'fostering active inclusion with a view to promoting equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability, in particular for disadvantaged groups'* must not only support measures to improve access to the labour market but also measures to support access to adequate incomes and measures to support access to good and services and participation in society.

3. **To carefully monitor the development and the quality of the National Strategies and policy frameworks that are required as part of the enabling conditions:** The linking of ESF investments under the enabling conditions to clear national and regional anti-poverty, inclusion and non-discrimination, strategies, and policy frameworks, has demonstrated its value in the current round. The Commission has a clear task to monitor and insist on the careful development of these strategies and policy frameworks, with the engagement of all relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty and anti-poverty organisations. The Commission must insist on the quality of these frameworks and the appropriate investment of ESF funds to the relevant parts of the strategies and frameworks. The links between ESF investments, other EU Funds and national budgets must be made more transparent. There is a strong need to make it easier to combine the use of funds such as ESF and ERDF.
4. **To continue to ensure the added value of ESF+ funding:** ESF+ represents a substantial investment in European solidarity and in programmes and actions to tackle poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, it clearly must have added value and not replace national funding. The Commission has a key role to ensure this added value by ensuring ESF+ funds are focused on testing innovations that can address complex problems, in an integrated and person-focused way, this must allow for the possibility that the innovations might fail and can be the basis of fruitful mutual learning, including at EU level. The Commission can help to ensure that ESF+ is used to upscale successful experiments from previous rounds and ensure their wider application. The ESF can also be used to develop essential mainstream programmes where they do not already exist and act as a trigger to lever new national, regional, or local funding, to support such programmes. An additional added value of ESF investments is to improve the infrastructure to deliver national policy frameworks and the capacity of all actors, including NGOs, to play their necessary role in the programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ESF+. The Commission must play a role to ensure the sustainability of successful approaches and ultimately their integration into mainstream funded programmes, strengthening the analytical base, efficiency, and impact of the mainstream programmes.
5. **To ensure the focus on people experiencing severe deprivation remains within the delivery of the FEAD under the ESF+ Regulation.** The Commission needs to ensure the focus on those experiencing severe deprivation, which has been quite uniformly observed in the FEAD Programme 2014-2020 is maintained with the integration of FEAD into the ESF+ programme. In addition, it will be important for the Commission to monitor that the necessary investments from ESF+ for accompanying measures are made, to ensure the social inclusion of people who benefit directly from the FEAD support.
6. **To maintain a strong focus on combating poverty within the transnational exchange forums in the 2021-2027 period:** The Commission will have the central role to ensure that the opportunities for transnational exchange and learning in the 2021-2027 period maintains a strong focus on inclusion and combating poverty. The Commission needs also to encourage member states to use the full potential under ESF+ Regulation for transnational exchange, to share experiences and to learn lessons in the fight against poverty, as an essential contribution to building EU solidarity and an EU public space. The work of this transnational ESF+ Community should play a role in documenting and publicising key efforts and practices in using ESF+ for combating poverty.
7. **To promote the use of ESF+ to support an empowerment and capabilities approach to combating poverty and ensuring social inclusion:** The Commission is well placed to ensure that the full potential of the specific object '*promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children*' is used to promote an empowerment and capabilities approach to tackling poverty and exclusion. Such an approach would involve the development of actions and projects designed with the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Such an approach would also build on the strengths and expertise of people who live in poverty. The investments under this approach, would favour a community development approach, where people experiencing poverty, exclusion and discrimination are empowered to reflect collectively on their experience and to bring forward proposals based on the analysis they make from this common reflection. Investment in such an approach could revitalise and update the learnings on 'participation, partnership and multi-dimensionality' of the EU poverty

programmes that operated in the 1980s and early 1990s. It would also be an opportunity to share experiences and develop common understandings in relation to the fight against poverty in an enlarged EU. Developing such an approach requires investment in anti-poverty NGOs, academics and experts who can help support the practice and place the practice in theoretical frameworks. Most importantly it requires investment in the participation of people experiencing poverty. Such an approach also needs effective partnership structures, open to hearing the analysis of people directly impacted by poverty and open to sharing power and resources to bring about the necessary shifts in policy and practice that would inevitably arise from the insights and expertise of people experiencing poverty. Support for the development of 'identified positions/experts by experience' within all the institutions and organisations with a role to play in ESF+ delivery will also support an empowerment and capabilities approach. ESF can play an important role to support training for people experiencing poverty for them to be able to take up roles as 'experts by experience'.

8. **To monitor and document more fully the operation of the partnership principle to support the move from formal compliance to more meaningful engagement:** Effective and well-functioning partnerships are essential for a successful delivery of ESF to combat poverty. To assist in a strengthening of the practice of partnership within ESF+, the Commission will need to dedicate time and resources to monitoring and documenting more fully the operation of the partnership principle to support the move from formal compliance to more meaningful engagement. There is a wealth of experience to draw on from previous rounds and the 'code of conduct on partnership' is an excellent tool to facilitate further developments. Responses to the Covid crises often led to new and enhanced partnerships between statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations that could be built on in the future. The full potential in the Regulation that requires that an appropriate amount be dedicated to the capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations and that 0.25% of ESF+ resources should be programmed when Member States have a country-specific recommendation in this area, must be utilised. Social and anti-poverty organisations must benefit from this investment in capacity building both in terms of improving engagement in the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and

promoting greater access and participation in implementation of the funds.

9. **To further develop the work on simplification:** The Commission needs to continue its work on reducing administrative burden in relation to the implementation of ESF+ and build on progress made in previous periods in relation to issues such as: combined regulatory requirements for the set up and operation of the monitoring systems, the definition of simplified cost options, duplications of controls and compliance with state aid regulations. There remains the need to address practical implementation issues from previous rounds that makes it difficult to engage with ESF: excessive bureaucracy, excessive goals and measurable results for the social area, and project logic, that cause difficulties for drawing down the funds available and in implementing the programmes. There is also the need to guarantee that the financial management/financial monitoring of the projects are made without great delays. The difficulties in the use of the list of common indicators in the collection of sensitive data, in relation to the personal and familial situation of users, needs to be addressed in order not to discourage the participation of people who may be the most in need of the assistance. The Commission must ensure some flexibility in relation to indicators for addressing poverty and inclusion and ensure that the indicators follow the needs rather than the needs having to match the indicators. The Commission needs to invest in the development and use of soft indicators to measure progress towards social inclusion, in relation to access to services, empowerment and participation in society, narrowing the distance to the labour market, as well as the traditional employment and employability indicators. Indicators need to allow for the extra time and support that may be needed to support those who are in the most disadvantaged situations. A balance of hard data with qualitative assessments is required.
10. **To promote greater transparency and more accessible communication:** The Commission must lead on improving the transparency, mutual learning, and communication in relation to the implementation and outcomes of the investments from ESF+. The country desk official responsible for the ESF+ has a key role to play as 'honest broker' to ensure the appropriate participation of representatives of all the relevant actors in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ESF+ in the country concerned. The annual reporting should be adjusted to not

only provide large amounts of data and tables on the use of the funds, or general citizen information reports but also to provide information aimed at general practitioners who engage with ESF as part of their work or campaigns. These general practitioners can be important amplifiers for generating awareness on the use of ESF+ funds. This requires improvements in statistical databases to make available timelier data to provide robust evidence on the impacts of ESF+ interventions. Investment in independent expert evaluations that can provide clear information on the total numbers of targeted groups and the numbers of people addressed by the actions implemented with the help of ESF and the extent to which these actions really take people out of poverty, is needed for this task. The Commission must insist on more transparency in relation to monitoring committees. An investment of time way above the minimum time required under the CPR (at least one day a year) is needed if monitoring committees are to fulfil the functions allocated to them in the Regulations.

11. **To track the use of ESF+ investments for the support they give to ensuring delivery on all the principles in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which will be an essential contribution to a Europe capable of eradicating poverty:** The principles and rights in the European Pillar of Social Rights are interlinked and all need follow up. The Commission must track the use of ESF+ investments for the support they give to ensuring delivery on all the principles in the EPSR, which will be an essential contribution to a Europe capable of eradicating poverty.
12. **To ensure that the EU Semester process is used to monitor and support the follow up of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the three headline targets on employment, skills, and social protection identified in the action plan, including the EU 2030 poverty target, 'The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, out of them, at least 5 million should be children':** The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 at the Gothenburg Social Summit. To put the social pillar on an equal footing with the green and digital transition, it is essential that the EU Semester<sup>4</sup> process is

used to monitor and support the follow up of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the three headline targets on employment, skills, and social protection identified in the action plan, including the EU 2030 poverty target, 'The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, out of them, at least 5 million should be children'. The use of the social scoreboard indicators, cross referenced with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) must be used to assist in this monitoring work. Social and anti-poverty NGO are stakeholders in the Semester process and the Commission has a role to facilitate their meaningful participation in the semester process.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

1. **To ensure that the reporting on the implementation of the ESF+ by the European Commission includes a focus on combating poverty and the contribution ESF+ investments are making to achieving the EU 2030 Poverty Target:** The regulations governing ESF+ assigns important roles to the European Parliament in relation to monitoring, control and evaluation. The European Parliament must ensure that the reporting from the European Commission to enable them to fulfil this role includes information on how the ESF+ is used to combat poverty, to support integrated anti-poverty strategies and to reach specific groups and communities at risk of poverty and exclusion. The reporting must also include the contribution ESF+ investments are making to achieving the EU 2030 poverty target. Attention to these issues must be given in the key debates on ESF+ in the Parliament.
2. **To arrange hearings in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs to inform, and analyse the effectiveness of efforts to make progress in combating poverty through the ESF+ investments and to monitor the implementation of partnership in the monitoring and delivery of ESF+:** Organise hearings in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs to: discuss implementation of the

<sup>4</sup> The European Semester provides a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the European Union. It allows EU countries to discuss their economic and budget plans and monitor progress as specific times throughout the year. Part of the framework includes Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) which provide tailored advice to individual Member States on how to boost jobs, growth and investment, while maintaining sound public finances. (Source, ec.europa.eu website)

ESF+ including the role it plays to combat poverty and to hear direct testimonies from all the relevant actors including people experiencing poverty and social and anti-poverty organisations, to monitor and share information on practice in relation to the implementation of partnership principle in the monitoring and delivery of ESF+, to facilitate informed debate and develop recommendations for enhanced use of ESF+ to combat poverty.

3. **To ensure an annual hearing in the Budgetary Control Committee to discuss implementation of ESF+ including investments to combat poverty:** Organise an annual hearing of the Budgetary Control Committee to discuss implementation of the ESF+ including the role it plays to combat poverty and to hear direct testimonies from all the relevant actors including people experiencing poverty and social and anti-poverty organisations.
4. **To ensure that ESF+ funds are used to support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee:** Given that the Parliament is the originator of the Child Guarantee the Parliament has a special role to play to ensure well developed national strategies to implement the child guarantee and to ensure ESF+ funds are used to deliver the guarantee European child guarantee.
5. **To ensure that the relevant intergroups addressing issues such as, poverty, anti-corruption, anti-racism and diversity, children's rights, climate change, disability, rural and urban areas, digitalisation, and social economy, draw attention to the role and use of ESF+ for combating poverty:** The intergroups provide important spaces for more detailed and sustained follow up of key EU policies and programmes. The use of ESF+ to combat poverty, exclusion and discrimination should be a topic covered in a number of inter-groups from their varying perspectives. The intergroups are also an important space to build consensus across political groups in the European Parliament and this is essential to make progress on combating poverty.
6. **To ensure that the political groups create spaces to discuss key aspects of how ESF+ is used for combating poverty:** Combating poverty needs to be a priority for all political groups in the European Parliament. Each group coming from their political perspectives and priorities can create space to engage in dialogue with all the relevant actors, including social and anti-poverty NGOs, and people experiencing poverty, to see how ESF+ investments can better contribute to the fight against poverty. Groups need to adopt positions that can contribute positively to the eradication of poverty and seek to build a wide political consensus in relation to combating poverty and achieving greater equality.
7. **To monitor follow up of the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), including the EU 2030 poverty target identified in the action plan to follow up the EPSR, and monitor that ESF+ investments are used to support the implementation of all the principles in the EPSR:** The European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 at the Gothenburg Social Summit. The Parliament must seek to put the follow up of the EPSR on an equal footing with the green and digital transition. The tracking of the use of ESF+ investments to combat poverty and social exclusion will be essential to ensure delivery on all of the principles in the EPSR.
8. **To build the widest possible political consensus on the need for more ambitious and urgent action for combating poverty and the recognition that there will be no successful green and digital transition without tackling poverty and achieving greater social cohesion:** Greater political consensus is essential in relation to achieving progress in combating poverty and achieving greater equality. The Parliament must be champions for injecting more urgency and ambition for EU action to combat poverty, exclusion, and discrimination as a goal in its own right, as well as a prerequisite for successful green and digital transition. This must include ensuring the maximum potential for combating poverty under the ESF+ is realised, as well as generating more ambition and resources for future EU policies and programmes to combat poverty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES

- 1. To ensure a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives identified for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policy.**

The Member States will need to ensure that the Partnership Agreements, the Operational Programmes, the indicators, the monitoring and reporting arrangements, include a clear focus on combating poverty within the 5 specific objectives for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policies.
- 2. To ensure ESF+ investments are linked to, national, regional and local, strategies and policy frameworks and international commitments and to ensure the added value of ESF+ funding:**

The enabling conditions in the 2014-2020 period have proven an important innovation to focus ESF investments. Member States need to invest in the quality of the strategies and policy frameworks required under these enabling conditions and ensure they are developed with the active participation of all the relevant actors, including social and anti-poverty NGOs and people experiencing poverty. Member States must also ensure ESF+ is used to follow up international commitments, including the European Pillar of Social Rights, the charter of fundamental rights and the Country Specific Recommendations under the EU semester process. Member States must ensure ESF+ funds are used to upscale successful experiments from previous rounds and ensure their wider application. The ESF can also be used to develop essential mainstream programmes where they do not already exist and act as a trigger to lever new national, regional, or local funding, to support such programmes. An additional added value of ESF investments is to improve the infrastructure to deliver national policy frameworks and the capacity of all actors, including NGOs, to play their necessary role in the programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ESF+ test innovations that can address complex problems; this must allow for the possibility that the innovations might fail. The Member States must ensure the sustainability of successful approaches and ultimately their integration into mainstream funded programmes, strengthening the analytical base, efficiency, and impact of the mainstream programmes.
- 3. To ensure in the implementation of the ESF+ that the holistic and integrated response to combating poverty that is possible under the ESF+ Regulation is fully utilised:**

The integrated approach recognised under the Active Inclusion Recommendation (2008): access to goods and services, access to adequate and enabling incomes, and inclusive employment, remains valid. The Member States will need to ensure that this integrated approach and the wider holistic approach needed to ensure participation in society as well as in the world of employment, is possible under projects supported under each of the specific objectives to implement the social inclusion policies, based on the antipoverty strategies and frameworks required as part of ESF+ enabling conditions. It will be a step backwards, if the individual elements of the integrated approach are dealt with separately under the specific objective that seems the most relevant to that element. For instance the specific objective: *'enhancing equal and timely access to quality, sustainable and affordable services, including services that promote the access to housing and person-centred care including healthcare; modernising social protection systems, including promoting access to social protection, with a particular focus on children and disadvantaged groups; improving accessibility including for persons with disabilities, effectiveness and resilience of healthcare systems and long-term care services'* needs not only to support actions that address access to goods and services, but also within the same programmes and projects, support actions, to assist in access to employment and to contribute to actions to ensure adequate incomes. Likewise, the specific objective, *'fostering active inclusion with a view to promoting equal opportunities, non-discrimination and active participation, and improving employability, in particular for disadvantaged groups'* must not only support measures to improve access to the labour market but also measures to support access to adequate incomes and measures to support access to good and services and participation in society.

4. **To ensure the focus on people experiencing severe deprivation remains within the delivery of the FEAD under the ESF+ Regulation:**

Member States have sought to ensure that the focus on people experiencing deprivation was addressed under the separate FEAD programme in the 2014-2020 period. Member States have a responsibility to maintain this focus on people experiencing severe deprivation in the coming period, when FEAD is integrated into the ESF+ Regulation. They must also use investments from ESF+ for the required accompanying measures to ensure the social inclusion of people who benefit directly from the FEAD strand of the ESF+.

5. **To promote and invest in exchange and learning at regional, national and trans-national levels:**

Member States should promote and use the potential under the regulation in the 2021-2027 period, to ensure opportunities exchange and learning, including trans-national exchanges. This should include exchange on the use of ESF+ for combating poverty to build knowledge of realities and responses in other regions and countries and mutual learning on effective participation and partnership. Trans-national exchange is an essential contribution to building EU solidarity and an EU public space.

6. **To create the conditions to use ESF+ investments to support an empowerment and capabilities approach to combating poverty and ensuring social inclusion:**

The specific objective *'promoting social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including the most deprived persons and children'* should increase the potential for ESF investments to promote an empowerment and capabilities approach to tackling poverty and exclusion. Member States should seek to create the conditions to support such an approach based on the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Such an approach would build on the strengths and expertise of people who live in poverty and facilitates their collective analysis to feed into ESF+ implementation at all levels. It also requires investment in identified positions for 'experts by experience' in the agencies and organisations that work on ESF and investment in training to develop the capacities of people experiencing poverty to take up roles as 'experts by experience'. Part of this approach also involves engaging participants in ESF+ trainings and activities in the evaluation of the training or services provided, to ensure they are responding to the needs of the individuals concerned. It requires the

participation and investments in anti-poverty NGOs, with the expertise and track-record of delivering this approach. Member States would need to create within the Partnership Agreements, Operational Programmes and calls for projects, the conditions to enable such an approach. Such an approach also needs effective partnership structures, open to hearing the analysis of people directly impacted by poverty and open to sharing power and resources to bring about the necessary shifts in policy and practice that would inevitably arise from the insights and expertise of people experiencing poverty.

7. **To invest in the development and strengthening of partnership, including social and anti-poverty NGOs, as an essential element to effectively use ESF+ funding and to ensure the engagement of all relevant Ministries:**

Effective and well-functioning partnerships are essential for a successful delivery of ESF to combat poverty. To assist in a strengthening of the practice of partnership within ESF+, Member States need to dedicate time and invest resources to build qualitative engagement of all the necessary partners. This development of partnership can build on the experience from previous rounds and the 'code of conduct on partnership' which provides an excellent tool to facilitate further developments. Member States must use the capacity building possibilities under the ESF+ regulation for all the actors involved (including social and anti-poverty NGOs) to develop the partnership practice. The combat of poverty will not be achieved by social ministries alone, though they have a lead role to play, the lead Ministry for ESF+ may also be within a ministry other than social affairs, however, all relevant Ministries, such as those in charge of employment, social inclusion, health, finance, youth, gender equality, environment, and culture, have a role to play in combating poverty.

8. **To invest further in simplification and make ESF funds more accessible to social and anti-poverty NGOs:** The Member States must make use of the progress made in previous periods to reduce administrative burden to enable the funds to be more accessible to social and small or grass root anti-poverty NGOs. There remains the need to address practical implementation issues from previous rounds that makes it difficult to engage with ESF: excessive bureaucracy, excessive goals and measurable results for the social area, and project logic, that cause difficulties for drawing down the funds available and in implementing the programmes. There is also the need to guarantee that the financial management/ financial monitoring of the projects are made without great delays. Overcoming the difficulties in the use of the list of common indicators in the collection of sensitive data and the existence of distinct social inclusion indicators, should also facilitate more access to the funds for smaller NGOs. A key step to simplify further at Member State and programme level, will be to invest in developing collaborative relationships (and eventually partnership) between Managing Authorities and Auditing Authorities and between Managing Authorities and the final beneficiaries/ stakeholders. Addressing the administrative burden generated at programme level by the process known as 'gold-plating' is key to simplification. Experiences with 'global grants' and technical assistance, has facilitated the participation of smaller grassroots organisations in the past. Such systems will need to be put in place to truly make progress on the access of smaller anti-poverty organisations to ESF+ funds. Investment of ESF funds in social and anti-poverty NGOs and in building their capacity is crucial. Anti-poverty NGOs must have as their primary focus, combating poverty and social exclusion, be committed to the meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty at all levels in the organisation, and their empowerment to ensure their collective analysis and voice is heard. While it takes a great investment of time to find effective ways to reduce the administrative burden associated with ESF funds and to ensure anti-poverty NGOs have access to the funds, it is worth it, as it would allow for more effective use of funds to combat poverty.
9. **To ensure greater transparency in the monitoring, delivery, and evaluation of ESF+ investments:** The Member States must priorities improving the transparency, and the communication needed to make visible the outcomes of the investments from ESF+. The annual reporting should be adjusted to not only provide large amounts of data and tables on the use of the funds, or general citizen information reports but also to provide information aimed at general practitioners who engage with ESF as part of their work or campaigns. These general practitioners can be important amplifiers for generating awareness on the use of ESF+ funds. This requires improvements in statistical databases to make available timelier data to provide robust evidence on the impacts of ESF+ interventions. Investment in bottom-up monitoring and evaluation with stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty who participate in ESF+ projects and programmes, and the use of questionnaires and interviews for this purpose, is needed to assist with the transparency, delivery, and evaluation of ESF+ investments. Investment is also needed in independent expert evaluations that can provide clear information on the total numbers of targeted groups and the numbers of people addressed by the actions implemented with the help of ESF and the extent to which these actions really take people out of poverty, is needed for this task. There must be increased transparency in relation to the monitoring committees and an investment of time way above the minimum time required under the ESF+ Regulation, to ensure the monitoring committees has any possibility to fulfil the functions assigned to them in the Regulation.
10. **To invest in the necessary personnel to deliver the ESF+ programme and to invest in developing their capacities to take on this challenging task:** To achieve any of the recommendations above requires that there is an investment in the necessary personnel, with the necessary skills, to take on these important tasks. This is an essential part of the structure needed for the successful delivery of the ESF+. ESF+ investments must be available to support this infrastructure and to invest in developing the capacities of the personnel involved to take on these challenging tasks.



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

1. **Promote exchange and learning from the use of ESF+ to combat poverty and the contribution ESF+ investments make to reaching the EU 2030 Poverty Target:** The Council of the EU must encourage, facilitate, and promote transnational exchange and learning on the use of ESF+ for combating poverty and the contribution ESF+ investments make to the EU 2030 poverty target. The exchange on ESF+ should also increase knowledge across Member States in relation to the National Anti-Poverty Strategies and Policy Frameworks that are required for ESF+ funding and the extent to which these strategies and frameworks underpin ESF+ investments. Such exchanges are essential to build knowledge of realities and responses in other countries and make a vital contribution to building EU solidarity and an EU public space.
2. **Ensure a strong involvement of key Council formations in the follow up of the ESF+:** Key Council formations such as EPSCO, ENVI, culture, health, etc. should actively follow how the ESF+ investments are used to combat poverty and follow up the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ESF+ in this regard. The Employment and the Social Protection Committees and Council's working parties must prepare the ground for these discussions in Council formations, this work must include relevant information about stakeholders' involvement, including social and anti-poverty NGOs, in the implementation and monitoring of the plans. The Social Protection Committee can promote exchanges between national administrations and play a key role in monitoring impact of ESF+ on poverty/social exclusion
3. **Ensure as part of the follow up of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), regular social summits, which includes space to reflect on how ESF+ is used to implement the agreed Principles of the EPSR:** The EU Pillar of Social Rights provides a very positive context for the implementation of ESF+. It is essential that the Council follows up the adoption of the Pillar in future Social Summits. The agenda for such summits should include the role ESF+ plays in supporting the implementation of the Pillar, including the combat of poverty.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO SOCIAL AND ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

1. **To allocate time and resources to engaging at a broad political level to influence the use of ESF+ for combating poverty:** ESF+ is an enormous investment in building a more social Europe. The Regulation for the ESF+ enables investment in a broad social inclusion focus that includes supports for: activation to decent jobs, access to goods and services, and better infrastructure and increased capacity, to deliver on European, national, and regional anti-poverty frameworks and strategies, including the follow up of the 'child guarantee'. Even to positively influence a small percentage of ESF+ investments can have a big impact on the lives of thousands of people living in the EU. Social and anti-poverty NGOs would do well to invest time, in accordance with their role, capacities and conditions, to seek to influence the use of ESF+ for combating poverty. Supporting or participating in existing networks, coalitions, or platforms, of NGOs and civil society, that seek to influence ESF, or wider EU funds can be an effective way to engage in influencing ESF implementation. Engagement in these wider networks and platforms can be a good way to build links between the responses to social and environmental challenges and the use of EU funds to meet these challenges.
2. **To take a 'watchdog role' to ensure combating poverty is a clear objective of investments under the ESF+.** Social and anti-poverty NGOs are in a position to take a 'watchdog role' to hold to account, the bodies with the key responsibilities to deliver the ESF+. In this role they seek to ensure, the combat of poverty is addressed in a holistic and integrated approach and targeted to the individuals and communities experiencing poverty and exclusion, under each of the 5 specific objectives identified for the 25% earmarked for social inclusion policy. This will require continuous engagement to ensure this focus is permitted and supported in the framing of the partnership agreements, operational programmes, calls for projects, indicators selected, monitoring and evaluation requirements, and the information tools used for ESF+. This should also involve seeking to ensure that the added value of ESF+ investments is respected and that ESF investments are not used to replace national budgets but rather act as a lever to increase national budgets addressed to tackling poverty. This role would also include ensuring the link between ESF+ investments and national

and regional anti-poverty strategies and framework and to the EU semester process. They must also seek to ensure the clear focus on meeting the needs of those experiencing extreme deprivation is maintained and further developed in the implementation of FEAD within the ESF+.

- 3. To seek to be active partners positively engaged in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the ESF+:** Some organisations, networks and platforms within the social and anti-poverty NGOs are well placed to seek to be positively engaged as active partners in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of ESF+. Social and anti-poverty NGOs should seek to have the capacity building funds available under ESF used to increase the capacity of their sector to engage in these processes. To ensure the ESF+ has impact on scale, requires that investments are also linked to and delivered through mainstream providers including, institutional actors, national, regional, and local authorities, training and educational institutions, employments services, social and health services, large scale social enterprises. Particularly, given the innovative nature of ESF investments, and the contribution it can make to developing mainstream services, wide scale partnerships will be essential for the development, implementation, and assessment of these investments. NGOs have an important role to play in these partnerships, ensuring the right groups are targeted and reached, ensuring the voice of people who directly benefit from the investments are heard, and helping to ensure the right conclusions are drawn and the successful sustaining and mainstreaming of practices that are seen to be successful.

- 4. To seek to receive directly ESF+ funds and to take on the responsibilities of delivering projects and actions under the ESF+:** Many social and anti-poverty NGOs have the capacity and have successfully acted as project promoters in the delivery of ESF investments. However, it is important to note that even with further progress on simplification, for NGOs to engage as project promoters, delivering ESF+ investments, will require already developed capacities and financial resources to be able to engage successfully and sustainably. It is also important to remember that there has been practices in the past where intermediary bodies or larger NGO structures, have been successful in managing large ESF projects and delivering the funds received, in amounts more manageable to smaller and locally based NGOs, working close to people on the ground experiencing poverty, exclusion and discrimination. Social and anti-poverty NGOs should continue to seek to be ESF+ project promoters. This can be essential to ensure that some groups experiencing high degrees of poverty, exclusion and discrimination are reached by ESF+ investments. They should also continue to seek ways that funds can be accessible to smaller NGOs and grassroots organisations.

5. **To be champions of an empowerment and capacity building approach with the active participation of people experiencing poverty:**

Social and anti-poverty NGOs should be champions for an empowerment and capacity building approach and seek to have the participation of people experiencing poverty included and resourced in a meaningful way. The motto of the disability movement 'nothing about us without us' needs to be adopted for the investments for combating poverty. While recognising that the ESF investments to fight poverty are aimed at lifting people out of poverty, and if that is successfully achieved, the people concerned will still have important insights and inputs to make in relation to how to successfully combat poverty. This empowerment approach requires investments in the NGOs with expertise and track record of promoting this approach. Such an approach needs to build on the strengths and expertise of people who live in poverty and facilitates their collective analysis to feed into their engagement in ESF+ implementation at all levels. It also requires investment in identified positions for 'experts by experience' in the agencies and organisations that work on ESF and investment in training to develop the capacities of people experiencing poverty to take up roles as 'experts by experience'

6.. **To actively campaign for more ambitious and urgent EU responses to combating poverty, for greater equality and to ensure a strong link between actions to address the climate and ecological crisis and actions to address poverty including investments under ESF+:**

Social and anti-poverty NGOs, as well as the wider values based civil society organisations, must campaign for more urgency and ambition for the combat of poverty. They need to build the link between poverty and social realities and environmental and climate realities and make the case and get across the message that there will be no successful green transition without combating poverty and achieving more equality and greater social cohesion. Use of the ESF+ to effectively combat poverty in sustainable ways and use of EU Funds to address climate change in a way that promotes combating poverty and inequality, are important parts of the solution to these enormous challenges of our time. Investment of time and energy, despite the pressing daily demands on anti-poverty and social NGOs, in local, regional, national, EU and international networks, coalitions, and strategies, for a sustainable future will be essential. Anti-poverty and social NGOs are uniquely placed to make the links between these levels and these realities.

# ANNEXES

## ANNEX 1: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

### Reports used for the literature review<sup>5</sup>

- [COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT EVALUATION of the 2014-2018 ESF support to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education and training - SWD/2021/0010 final](#)
- [The use of new provisions during the programming phase of the European Structural and Investment Funds, Altus Framework Consortium \(2016\)](#)
- [Frazer, H., Guio, A-C. and Marlier, E. \(eds\) \(2020\). Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee: Final Report, Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee \(FSCG\), Brussels: European Commission.](#)
- [Mini Tool Kit to support and encourage the use of ESF+ for actions to combat poverty and social exclusion of children](#)
- [European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 2020 - Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2019](#)
- [European Court of Auditors, Special Report, Ex ante conditionalities and performance reserve in Cohesion: innovative but not yet effective instruments \(2017\)](#)
- [European Court of Auditors, Special Report, EU policy initiatives and financial support for Roma integration: significant progress made over the last decade, but additional efforts needed on the ground \(2016\)](#)
- [European Court of Auditors, Special Report, Combating child poverty – Better targeting of Commission support required \(2020\)](#)
- [European Court of Auditors, Special Report, Performance-based financing in Cohesion policy: worthy ambitions, but obstacles remained in the 2014-2020 period \(2021\)](#)
- [European Parliament, Research for REGI Committee- Review of adopted Partnerships Agreements \(2015\)](#)
- [European Committee of the Regions, State of play and future challenges of the European Social Fund in promoting social cohesion in Europe's cities and regions \(2018\)](#)
- [LOST IN INTERPRETATION: The use of ESI Funds during 2014 – 2020 and the impact on the right of persons with disabilities to independent living - Ines Bulić Cojocariu and Nataša Kokić, European Network on Independent Living \(ENIL\)](#)
- [2016 EAPN Barometer Report – Monitoring the implementation of the \(at least\) 20% of the European Social Fund that should be devoted to fight against poverty during the period 2014-2020, Fátima Veiga, Paula Carvalho Cruz, and EAPN Task Force](#)
- [Community-Led Local Development, Evaluation Report 2014-2020, European Roma Grassroots Organisation \(ERGO\)](#)
- [Case Studies, Ineffectiveness or misuse of EU funds, Synthesis report of case studies from ERGO Network members in 4 countries, ERGO Network \(2020\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Language versions other than English are available at many of the links provided

## Links for practice examples submitted through closed questionnaire

### BELGIUM

Toolbox developed in a transnational exchange project that supports career choices of carers  
[www.datisdevraag.be](http://www.datisdevraag.be)

### BULGARIA

Socio-economic integration and improvement of access to education of persons from vulnerable groups in The Municipality of Samuel <https://samuil.bg/informatziya-i-uslugi/informatziya/aktualno/156-startira-proekt-sotzialno-ikonomicheska-integratziya-i-podobryavane-na-dostapa-do-obrazovanie-na-litza-ot-uyazvimi-grupi-v-obshtina-samuil>

### CZECHIA

Links to projects funded under OPs in Czechia: [Projects - www.esfcr.cz](http://www.esfcr.cz)

### FINLAND

In Finland there has been 516 projects under the ESF line 5, promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. You can find them all: <https://www.eura2014.fi/rrtiepa/projektilista.php?tl=5>

### GREECE

Community Centres <https://www.kentrakoinotitas.gr>

### PORTUGAL

- Videos presenting actions under the OP Social Inclusion and Employment <https://poise.portugal2020.pt/videos>
- Video about the MAVI (*Support Model for an Independent Life*) in Portugal <https://we.tl/t-SxAUHqracg>

### SLOVENIA

Projects supporting social activation:

- [https://www.ic-geoss.si/tocka\\_sodelovanja-13/](https://www.ic-geoss.si/tocka_sodelovanja-13/)
- [Social Activation Programme "Social Activation Project AS-Activate Yourself!"](#)

Projects supporting intergenerational and intercultural networking:

- <https://www.zpmmoste.net/2020/09/28/vecgeneracijski-center-skupna-tocka-v-prvi-polovici-leta-vec-kot-1600-ur-delavnic/>
- <https://www.ric-nm.si/si/projekti/nacionalni/vecgeneracijski-center-skupaj/>
- <https://www.vgc-gorenjska.si/>

### SPAIN

Personalised labour market integration and social inclusion for refugees in Murcia, Spain, [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/projects/spain/personalised-labour-market-integration-and-social-inclusion-for-refugees-in-murcia-spain](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/spain/personalised-labour-market-integration-and-social-inclusion-for-refugees-in-murcia-spain)

### SWEDEN

Project addressing School drop out in Sweden: <https://www.anhoriga.se/anhorigomraden/barn-som-anhoriga/samverkansprojekt/motivation-leder-till-framgang/>

## ANNEX 2: QUESTIONS FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- i) From the perspective of combating poverty what were the most significant changes in the ESF regulations for the period 2014 – 2020 as compared to the previous period?
- ii) What was the impact on programmes and projects for the fight against poverty from the insertion in the regulation of the requirements, *“At least 20 % of the total ESF resources in each Member State shall be allocated to the thematic objective promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination”*?
- iii) For Managing Authorities: what have been the main Operational Programmes and concrete actions foreseen with the explicit aim of combating poverty?
- iv) Have Anti-Poverty Organisations or NGOs fighting against poverty been included in the Partnership Agreements? How? Has their involvement led to a more efficient programming?
- v) What were the key actions/projects to fight against poverty supported in this ESF period? Can you give examples? Knowing the difficulty to evaluate the impact on short-term basis, can you enhance some of the actions that have already produced concrete changes or will be able to reach them on a longer period basis, namely with a continuation of ESF support?
- vi) Has this round of ESF (2014-2020) provided more financial support for Anti-Poverty NGOs on the ground to engage in projects to combat poverty than previous rounds? Can you give examples?
- vii) How were Anti-Poverty Organisations involved in the monitoring, evaluation, and implementation of this round of ESF (2014-2020)?
- viii) What would be your key recommendation/s to ensure a more effective use of funds to combat poverty under the ESF+?

## ANNEX 3: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

This list also includes those who responded in writing in the preparation of the Report. It is important to note that the view expressed were personal perspectives and may not reflect the views of the organisation or institution of the interviewee.

Country	Names	Organisation
Bulgaria	Maria Jeliaskova	EAPN Bulgaria, IPS - BAS
	Douhomir Minev	EAPN Bulgaria
	Alexander Nikolov	EAPN Bulgaria
	Desislava Georgieva-Ushkolova	Ministry Of Labour and Social Policy
Czechia	Iva Kuchyňková	Caritas Czechia - EAPN Czechia
	Nikola Taragoš	NGO Romodrom
	Vít Čaban	City of Prague, Department of European Funds
	Katerina Kapounova	European Commission, Czechia Country Desk
Greece	Christos Kyrkoglou	European Social Fund Coordination and Monitoring Authority, Ministry of Development and Investments
	Katerina Giantsiou	European Social Fund Coordination and Monitoring Authority, Ministry of Development and Investments
	George Kirmizidis	European Commission, Greek country desk.
	Dimitris Logaras	National Confederation of Disabled People of Greece (NCDP)
Ireland	Mary McGarry	Ministry of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
	Sinéad Quinn	Department of Rural and Community Development
	Jenny O'Connor	Department of Rural and Community Development
	Joanna Gawrylczk-Malesa	European Commission, Irish Country Desk
	Paul Ginnel	EAPN Ireland
	Brid O'Brien	Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE)
Lithuania	Rimantas Garbštas	Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, EU Investment Unit
	Viktorija Krutulytė	National NGO Coalition
	Rimgailė Baltutė	EAPN Lithuania
Portugal	Paula Cruz	EAPN Portugal
	Fatima Veiga	EAPN Portugal
	Sandra Tavares	ESF MA OP Social Inclusion and Employment
Spain	Marta García Rodríguez	European Social Fund Administrative Unit Ministry of Labour and Social Economy
	Graciela Malgesini	EAPN Spain
	Sali Guntín	Patrona de Fundación Secretariado Gitano, Fundación Cepaim, Ex Vice President EAPN Spain
	Ana Carrero	European Commission, Spanish Country Desk

## ANNEX 4: CLOSED QUESTIONNAIRE USED TO RECEIVE MORE GENERAL INPUTS

Name of your Organisation/Institution

Country (or European level)

### **Years of experience of your Organisation/Institution with ESF?**

- Less than 3 years
- From 3 to 6 years
- From 6 to 10 years
- More than 10 years

### **Type of organisation (choose one that best describes your reality)**

- Not for profit organisation / NGO
- Foundation
- Social partner
- ESF Managing Authority or Implementing Body
- Local authority
- Regional authority
- National authority
- European institution
- Other:

**In your opinion, what was the impact of the regulation requirement that: "At least 20 % of the total ESF resources in each Member State shall be allocated to the thematic objective "promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination"?"**

- A very positive impact
- A positive impact
- No impact
- Combating poverty was less prioritised in this round than the previous round

**In two or three sentences, can you please explain your answer to the previous question?**

**Has this round of ESF (2014-2020) provided more financial support for Anti-Poverty NGOs to engage in projects to combat poverty than previous rounds?**

- Yes
- No
- May be



**Can you briefly explain your answer to the previous question?**

How do you consider the level of involvement of Anti-Poverty Organisations in this round of ESF (2014-2020)? You can choose more than one answer

- Well structured
- Transparent
- Participatory
- Not transparent
- Tick boxing exercise
- Too limited
- No involvement at all
- Other:

**Can you provide a link/s to a project/s supported by ESF during this round (2014 – 2020) that has had a focus on the combating of poverty?**

**Would you like to share additional information?**

## ANNEX 5: ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES RECEIVED FROM THE CLOSED QUESTIONNAIRE

### GENERAL INFORMATION

We had twenty-one responses to the questionnaire coming from 13 countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain) and two responses coming from the European level NGOs. 12 responses were from Not-for-Profit organisations, 5 from Managing Authorities or Implementing Bodies, 2 from European Institutions, 2 from Universities, 1 from a National Authority and 1 from a welfare organisation. Respondents or their organisations had a long history of engagement with the ESF with only 3 reporting less than 6 years of experience.

### IMPACT OF REQUIREMENT TO RING FENCE 20% FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

20 respondents reported a positive or very positive impact from the requirement that at least 20% of the total ESF resources in each Member State be allocated to the thematic objective “promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination”. 2 reported that it had no impact and one respondent reported that combating poverty was less prioritised in this round than the previous round. Reasons given included:

- ‘More attention has been given to outreach and activation, also taking into account the thresholds people have to enter the labour market. Also, the interest in how to measure soft outcomes is a positive element’
- ‘This has given greater visibility to actions for social inclusion and the fight against poverty and has driven new stakeholders to carry out ESF projects. It also showed the importance of working upstream of professional integration actions to meet the multiple needs of people living in poverty. It also seems important to act preventively’
- ‘The focus of ESF is on access to labour market. Work is important to escape from poverty, but it is no guarantee. I hope to see a shift to the Social Rights pillars and broader calls to improve inclusion’
- ‘ESF projects do not produce impacts and do not solve really the issues of problems of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination’
- ‘This requirement protected the money we need to support social inclusion’.
- ‘A very positive impact This clear distinction helps to fund appropriate grass-root action to alleviate social exclusion and poverty. This helps to support local level activities more directly and with better outcomes’.
- ‘More focus on social matters and policy making’
- ‘Regions were able to design and implement Regional Social Inclusion Strategies funded by ESF through Regional Operational Programmes’
- ‘Based on my experience in working with Roma grassroots and in Roma advocacy, I did not see any sustainable and direct allocation whatsoever which helped promoting social inclusion’
- ‘In this Community framework, anti-poverty organisations have not had many opportunities to access funds: very tight rules, indicators of achievement and outcome, few measures that meet the needs of the most vulnerable population. No flexibility in the development of projects’
- ‘It allows more resources to be directed towards social inclusion’

- 'Changes at national or local regulatory organisations could develop a comprehensive package of tailored support for people facing poverty, mental or physical problems, long-term unemployment and more'
- 'It is important that ESF includes and prioritizes the goal to tackle poverty'
- 'Regional programmes have included many activities targeting vulnerable groups, that were limited to ALMPs in the past, while now they have a broader scope and involve other actors' 'A positive impact that varies from country to country'

## ESF FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ANTI-POVERTY NGOS

Regarding whether this round of ESF (2014-2020) provided more financial support for Anti-Poverty NGOs to engage in projects to combat poverty than previous rounds, 9 respondents said yes, 7 no and 7 maybe. Reasons given for the responses included:

- 'There were quite some calls for projects on outreach and activation and this has had a positive impact for NGO's dealing with people who are further away from the labour market. But it is hard to say if specific Anti-Poverty NGO's have engaged as much in projects'
- 'While the resources allocated to social inclusion have been similar, the amounts specifically allocated to projects related to the fight against poverty have not been increased and have not been specifically targeted'
- 'Narrow focus on labour market was continued'
- 'I do not have this information. It is not just a matter of allocating more financial resources, but also of directing them properly so that they reach the neediest people, while helping them to overcome poverty and isolation effectively'
- 'The funding has significantly helped NGOs trying to fight poverty.'
- 'There has been more direct opportunity to fund actions'
- 'I do not have any statistical information about the issue. Before the ESF funding process and the required deductibles have been difficult for NGOs. I have understood that in the 2014-2020 period, this has been somewhat easier, and it has been easier also for NGOS to participate in projects'
- 'NGOs were able to develop programmes in favour of target groups at risk of extreme poverty'
- 'As the focus of expenditure in this area has primarily been on social inclusion, few anti-poverty organisations have received funding, though some of the NGOs that have received ESF support may also seek to address poverty through their work'
- 'We as community-led NGO('s) are not considered as equal partners'
- 'We feel that in this period of programming of the Structural Funds the possibilities for organisations working in the area of the fight against poverty were not many, compared to other years. The issue of allocating the 20% of the ESF to the fight against poverty may have been addressed, but in fact with projects many of them promoted by public entities'
- 'It allowed more interventions from NGOs to be supported and these interventions were directed towards the actual needs, which, in turn, allowed us to respond in a proper manner to identified issues'

- 'More like continuation of existing financial supports for NGOs'
- 'We as an NGO work with ESF for employment projects'
- 'We don't have comparative data on how the money has been channelled, if by direct management of the public authorities or through NGOs. We know it's been through both, but don't have the data on the split'
- 'Some of our members have successfully applied as project partner. Some of them did it for the first time in this round'

## **INVOLVEMENT OF ANTI-POVERTY ORGANISATIONS**

Regarding the level of involvement of Anti-Poverty Organisations in this round of ESF 18 responses described the process as, well structured, transparent, or participatory, 8 responses said, too limited, tick boxing or non-transparent and 3 responses indicated difficult to say or no involvement. Respondents could choose more than one option. Unfortunately, we had not asked a question to receive explanations for the answers given to this question.

## **EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE**

The links to examples of practices to combat poverty supported by ESF in this round, gathered through this exercise are included in annex 1, Bibliography and Resources.



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