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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EX-POST EVALUATION

of the

2007-2013 ESF programmes

This executive summary presents the main findings of the staff working document (SWD) of the *ex post* evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF) operational programmes (OPs) for the 2007-2013 programming period, conclusions for economic and social cohesion policy at EU level and the lessons learned for future EU programmes in the field of human capital.

Background

The ESF was implemented in the 2007-2013 programming period in all 28 Member States through 117 mono-fund OPs (59 in regions eligible under the regional competitiveness and employment objective, 42 in regions eligible under the convergence objective and 16 multi-objective programmes).

A number of key changes were introduced as compared with the previous programming period, in particular closer links to EU employment policies and objectives, and relevant country-specific recommendations, greater flexibility to decide how to achieve common objectives and a wider range of activities for regions under the convergence objective.

The socio-economic context in which the ESF OPs were programmed (between 2005 and 2007) was very different from the circumstances in which they were implemented, which were dominated by the economic and financial crisis.

Resources mobilised by the ESF¹

The total allocation for ESF 2007-2013 was EUR 115.6 billion, of which EUR 76.8 billion came from the EU budget, EUR 35.1 billion from national public contributions and EUR 3.7 billion contributed by private funds. This allocation supported operations that were carried out between January 2007 and December 2015 and was characterised by the following:

- a significant proportion was allocated to support operations in convergence regions (58 % of the total allocation or 69 % of EU funding alone);
- investments in human capital (HC) accounted for the biggest proportion of the funding (45.5 %), particularly in convergence regions, followed by investments in access to employment (A2E) activities (34.3 %), 14.3 % on social inclusion (SI), 2.1 % to strengthen institutional capacity (SIC) and 0.7 % on promoting partnerships (PP); and
- by December 2014, managing authorities (MAs) had declared to the Commission expenditures amounting to 79.3 % of the total allocation (and 90.7 % by 31 May 2016). There are considerable differences in implementation rates across Member States.

Key quantitative achievements

- The ESF registered 98.7 million participations by individuals, evenly spread between the inactive (36 %), the employed (33 %) and the unemployed (30 %);
- Key target groups supported included the low-skilled (40 %), young people (30 %) and the disadvantaged (at least 21 %);

¹ To allow for consistent comparison with other data, most figures presented here are from 2014 (or 2013 for the thematic evaluations). It is to be underlined that the figures presented (financial and in relation to indicators and results) are then lower than the final ones for the whole period, as operations were continued being implemented in 2015.

- 51.2 million participations by women were recorded, meaning a relatively balanced participation by gender (52 % women versus 48 % men) at EU level;
- At least 31.8 million positive results were achieved:
 - 9.4 million participants gained employment, of whom at least 0.3 million became self-employed;
 - 8.7 million gained a qualification/certificate; and
 - 13.7 million reported another positive result, such as improving skills, competences, etc.;
- At least 276 000 entities were supported and at least 109 000 products reported; and
- Based on macroeconomic simulations, the HC investments are estimated to have had a positive impact on GDP (0.25 % increase) and productivity. These effects are much stronger in the EU-12 (1.5 % increase), but they are also positive for the EU-15 (0.2 % increase).

Main findings of the evaluation

- The interventions generally reached the target groups, integrating people into the labour market, improving their skills and generating changes in systems;
- ESF 2007-2013 was an important instrument supporting national and EU priorities under the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategies (also in the context of the first cycles of the European Semester), and contributing to the goals of the social Open Method of Co-ordination and the 2020 Education and Training 2020 strategy;
- The flexibility in existing programmes and in reprogramming enabled swift responses to emerging challenges, in particular those created by the severe economic crisis that hit the EU in the programming period. As such, ESF helped to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis, which hit the most vulnerable groups in society especially badly;
- ESF programmes generated Community added value in various ways. The most significant were *volume* effects (providing significant financial resources to address employment and social challenges in a majority of Member States), *scope* effects (ESF action broadens existing action by supporting groups or policy areas that would not otherwise receive support) and *role* effects (support for local/regional innovations that are then mainstreamed at national level and for the introduction of new ways in which various stakeholders can work together); and
- The ESF provided significant support for the *modernisation, strengthening and widening of the scope of public services* such as public employment services (PESs) and other institutions responsible for active labour market actions.

Main lessons learned

The ESF should continue to be closely aligned with EU and national priorities, keeping flexibility to adjust to emerging needs, ensuring coverage of disadvantaged groups, focusing on young and older people, promoting the customisation of support, strengthening the results orientation, improving administrative capacity and continuing to reduce the administrative burden of managing the fund.

Many of the lessons learned through this evaluation have already been taken into account in the regulatory framework for the 2014-2020 programming period. Others should be considered in the context of preparations for the ESF post-2020.