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To: Mr Jeppe TRANHOLM-MIKKELSEN, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union

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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**EVALUATION**

**of the 2014-2018 ESF support to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and  
education and training**

{SWD(2021) 11 final}

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## Glossary

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
Beneficiary	Public or private body responsible for initiating or both initiating and implementing operations
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation
CSR	Country-specific recommendations
DG EMPL	Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
DG REGIO	Directorate-General Regional and Urban Policy
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
ELET	Early leavers from education and training
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
FEAD	Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
GDP	Gross domestic product
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
JRC	Joint Research Centre
MS	Member State
IP	Investment priority
NEET	Person not in employment, education or training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OP	Person not in employment, education or training
Operation	Operation means a project, contract, action or group of projects selected by the managing authorities of the programmes concerned, or under their responsibility, that contributes to the objectives of a priority or priorities
Participant	A person benefiting directly from an ESF intervention who can be identified and asked for their characteristics, and for whom specific expenditure is earmarked

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
SFC	System for Fund Management in the European Union
SWD	Staff working document
TO	Thematic objective
VET	Vocational education and training
YEI	Youth Employment Initiative

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This staff working document (SWD) presents results of the evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF) support to policies in the areas of employment and labour mobility (thematic objective 8), social inclusion (thematic objective 9), and education and training (thematic objective 10).

The conclusions of the evaluation are relevant for the implementation of the final stages of the 2014-2020 ESF investments and the preparation of the 2021-2027 programming period of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) by providing lessons, notably as regards cost-effectiveness, outreach and target groups most in need. The evaluation can support the negotiation of the ESF+ programmes and the design of operations by the Member States in the respective areas. In addition, it paves the way for the ex-post evaluation of the ESF.

The evaluation assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and the EU added-value including the sustainability of activities funded by the ESF in the **period 2014-2018**. It also addresses the complementarity and coherence with other relevant initiatives during the period concerned. It covers all Member States during that period (i.e. including the United Kingdom). It builds on the results of three separate studies, one for each thematic objective. The ESF and Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) support to youth employment, (part of thematic objective 8), was the subject of another thematic evaluation<sup>1</sup>. ESF support to Institutional capacity building (thematic objective 11) has been covered by a study<sup>2</sup>.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic happened when the field work for the supporting studies was completed or about to be completed. Also the time frame covered, 2014-2018, excludes the pandemic and the subsequent crisis. Nevertheless, a number of aspects of the lessons learned take on a particular relevance (see Box 5).

## 2 BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVENTION

### 2.1 Policy context

The ESF is one of the five European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. These are EU funding instruments providing structural and investment financing across the EU<sup>3</sup>. Their total budget in 2014-2020, to be invested in 11 areas called 'thematic objectives' (TO) as defined in the

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<sup>1</sup> The staff working document is available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9793&furtherNews=yes>

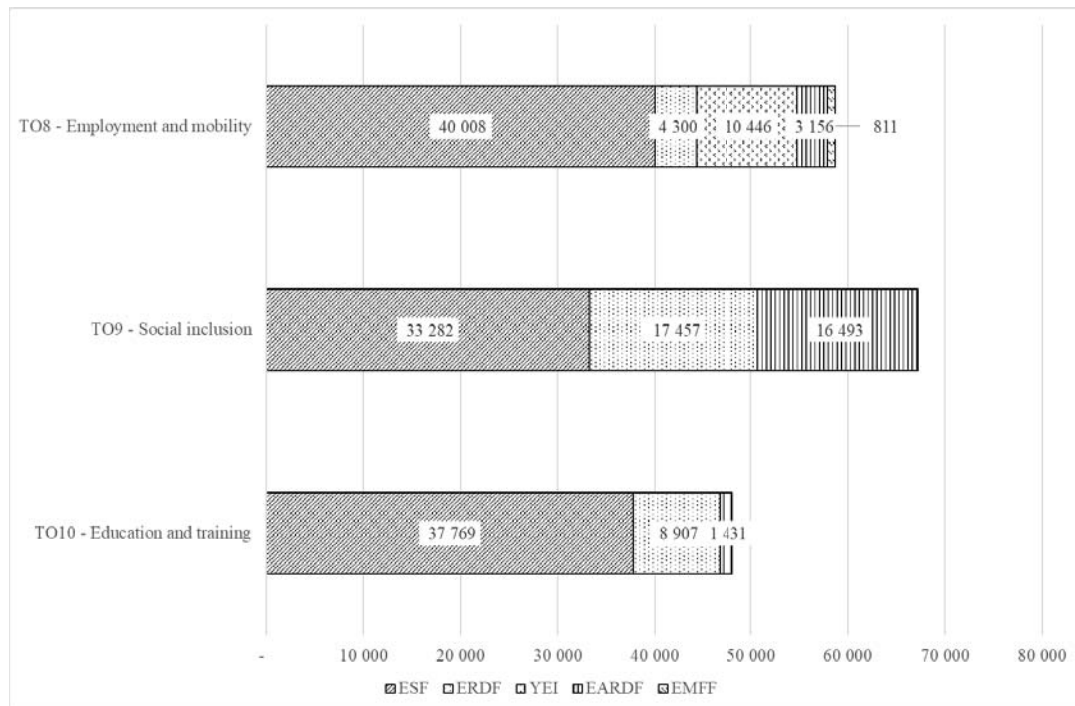
<sup>2</sup> The report is available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c7c56421-9fc4-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>3</sup> The other funds are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Rural Development Fund (EARDF) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).



Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)<sup>4</sup>, is EUR 461 billion. The funds allocated for thematic objectives 8, 9 and 10 amount to EUR 173 billion (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Allocations to thematic objectives 8, 9, and 10 (ESI Funds plus national co-financing) - EUR millions**



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

While the five funds address different stakeholders and sectors, they share two important features:

- They support growth and job creation, are aligned with the Europe 2020 strategy and contribute to the implementation of relevant country specific recommendations (CSR)<sup>5</sup>;
- They are delivered under shared management<sup>6</sup>.

The **Europe 2020 strategy**<sup>7</sup> emphasises smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as a way to overcome the structural weaknesses in Europe's economy, improve its competitiveness and productivity and underpin a sustainable social market economy. The ESF should contribute to

<sup>4</sup> Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and Council laying down common provisions on the ERDF, ESF, the Cohesion Fund, the EAFRD and the EMFF or European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF Funds). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013R1303>

<sup>5</sup> More information on the European Semester is available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/eus-economic-governance-explained\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/eus-economic-governance-explained_en)

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of shared management, see the section ESF objectives and functioning.

<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:EU\\_2020\\_Strategy](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:EU_2020_Strategy)

achieving the headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy on employment, education and poverty reduction<sup>8</sup>.

The Communication 'Investing in jobs and growth – maximising the contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds'<sup>9</sup> provides an overview of what the ESI Funds are expected to achieve in 2014-2020.

In November 2017, the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council proclaimed the **European Pillar of Social Rights**<sup>10</sup> which is about delivering new and more effective rights for citizens. It builds upon 20 key principles, structured around three chapters:

- Equal opportunities and access to the labour market;
- Fair working conditions;
- Social protection and inclusion.

The Pillar relies on previous policy guidance available at EU level, which oriented the use of resources provided by ESI Funds (ESIF).

### 2.1.1 ESF objectives and functioning

The ESF contributes to four of the 11 thematic objectives defined by the Common Provision Regulation<sup>11</sup>:

- Thematic objective 8: Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility;
- Thematic objective 9: Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination;
- Thematic objective 10: Investing in education and training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning;
- Thematic objective 11: Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration.<sup>12</sup>

In each Member State, the partnership agreement (PA)<sup>13</sup> describes the investment framework for the ESI Funds in that Member State. The partnership agreements are aligned with Europe

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<sup>8</sup> Article 4.1. of the ESF Regulation: (Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006, *OJ L 347, 20.12.2013*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013R1304>

<sup>9</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52015DC0639>

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en)

<sup>11</sup> The scope of ESF assistance for the 2014-2020 programming period is defined by Article 3 of the ESF Regulation No 1304/2013

<sup>12</sup> Not covered in this evaluation, as it was recently the subject of a separate study. See: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c7c56421-9fc4-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>13</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/contracts\\_grants/agreements/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/contracts_grants/agreements/index_en.htm)

2020, the EU strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, taking into account where appropriate the relevant country specific recommendations<sup>14</sup>.

The actual implementation is framed by programmes agreed between the Commission and the Member States, known as operational programmes for cohesion policy funds<sup>15</sup>. Besides the EU funding, operational programmes also receive national funding, public or private. The total budget for ESF operations for 2014-2020 is EUR 121 billion, with an EU contribution of EUR 84 billion<sup>16</sup>. National co-funding ranges from about 20% to over 50%, and depends on the development of regions, with less developed regions expected to contribute less than more developed ones.

Operational programmes are structured by priority axes, each composed of one or more investment priorities setting at least one specific objective. Priority axes may combine one or more complementary investment priorities from the ESF, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund. They may have a national or regional dimension. In total, 187 operational programmes received ESF funding in the 2014-2020 programming period. Ninety-two operational programmes are multi-fund meaning that they also receive ERDF or Cohesion Fund funding.

Under shared management the actual day-to-day management of operational programmes is entrusted to national bodies, working in accordance with rules established at Union level. The Commission supervises implementation and retains ultimate responsibility for the execution of the EU budget. The operational programmes fund projects or operations run by a range of public and private organisations called beneficiaries. These projects benefit their participants – for the ESF, these are usually individuals, but they can also be companies or organisations. The selection of projects, their monitoring, their control and the reporting are done by the national bodies.

The overall intervention logic of the ESF is given in Annex 4.

### 2.1.2 ESF support to employment and labour mobility (thematic objective 8)

Thematic objective 8 promotes sustainable, quality employment by boosting job creation, helping people into employment, and supporting labour mobility. The investment priorities supported within TO8 can be separated into three broad categories:

- investment priorities directly supporting access to employment

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<sup>14</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/partnership-agreements-european-structural-and-investment-funds\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/partnership-agreements-european-structural-and-investment-funds_en)

<sup>15</sup> Besides the ESF, the cohesion policy funds include the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF). The 2014 - 2020 7-year European budget set aside EUR352 billion for cohesion policy. More than half of this – EUR182.2 billion – was set aside for less developed regions. These are regions with a per capita GDP less than 75 % of the EU-27 average. EUR35 billion was allocated to transition regions, which are those with a per capita GDP between 75 % and 90 % of the EU average, and EUR54 billion to more developed regions which are those with a per capita GDP of more than 90 % of the EU average.

<sup>16</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/how/is-my-region-covered/](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/is-my-region-covered/)

- 8i Access to employment for job-seekers and inactive people, including the long-term unemployed and people far from the labour market, also through local employment initiatives and support for labour mobility;
- 8iv Equality between men and women in all areas including in access to employment, career progression, reconciliation of work and private life and promotion of equal pay for equal work;
- 8vi Active and healthy ageing

It also includes 8ii (sustainable integration into the labour market of young people) which has been covered by another evaluation exercise<sup>17</sup>.

- investment priorities supporting businesses
  - 8iii Self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation;
  - 8v Adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change.
- investment priority supporting institutions
  - 8vii Modernisation of labour market institutions.

### 2.1.3 ESF support to social inclusion (thematic objective 9)

Thematic objective 9 promotes social inclusion and combats poverty and any discrimination. The six investment priorities supported under TO9 tend to be characterised by a focus on a specific target group (marginalised communities - 9ii) or an issue (discrimination and equal opportunities - 9iii, access to services - 9iv and the social economy - 9v). Investment priority 9vi is about the instrument chosen to deliver policy (community-led local development strategies). Investment priority 9i (active inclusion) is very broadly defined. In a Member State, a minimum of 20% of the ESF allocation has to be allocated to TO9 (social inclusion). This is the only thematic objective with such earmarking.

### 2.1.4 ESF support to education and training (thematic objective 10)

Thematic objective 10 focuses on ‘investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning’, delivered through four interlinked investment priorities, which cover all stages of education and target a wide range of potential groups:

- 10i Reducing and preventing early school leaving and promoting equal access to education, including formal, non-formal and informal learning pathways for reintegrating into education and training;
- 10ii Improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary and equivalent education and training;
- 10iii Enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings; and
- 10iv Improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems.

## 2.2 Baseline and points of comparison

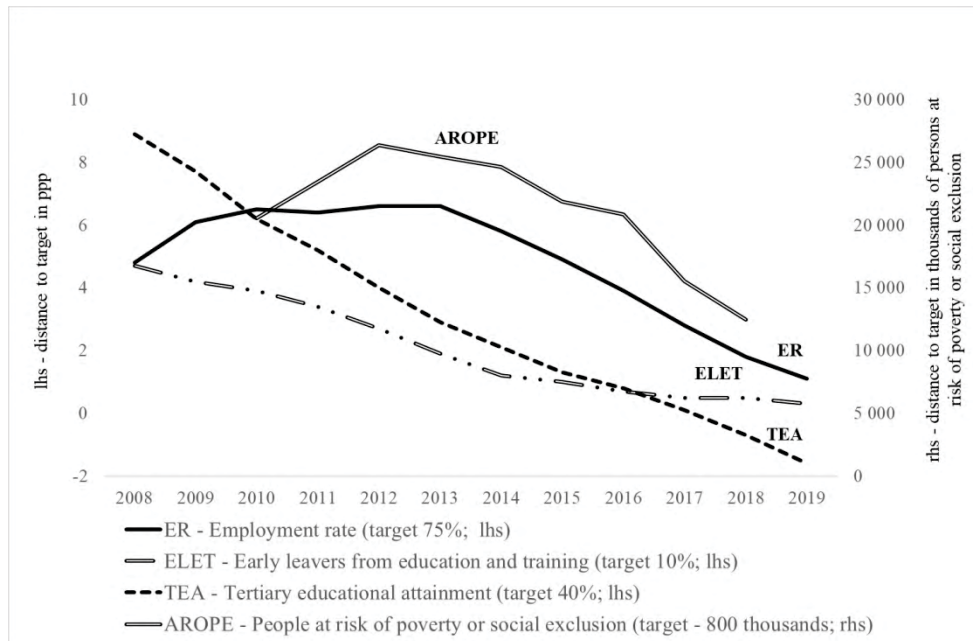
Four of the headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth<sup>18</sup>, are directly relevant to the ESF scope of action. They represent the labour

<sup>17</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9793&furtherNews=yes>

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the Europe 2020 strategy please see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators>

market, social inclusion and education and training dimensions of the strategy. **Figure 2** below shows the distance to the EU target for these four headline indicators. By the end of 2018, the EU seemed to be on track for the targets on the employment, early leavers from education and training and tertiary educational attainment. However, the target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion seemed out of reach. There are however, large differences between and even within Member States. The COVID 19 pandemic is already having an impact on these indicators.

**Figure 2. Europe 2020 - Distance to targets for headline indicators**



Source: Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators/europe-2020-strategy/main-tables>

Abbreviations: lhs: left hand scale; rhs: right hand scale.

### 2.2.1 Employment

One of the headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy adopted in 2010 by the European Council is to **increase the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 to at least 75% by 2020**. In addition, Member States set national targets for the employment rate in 2020.

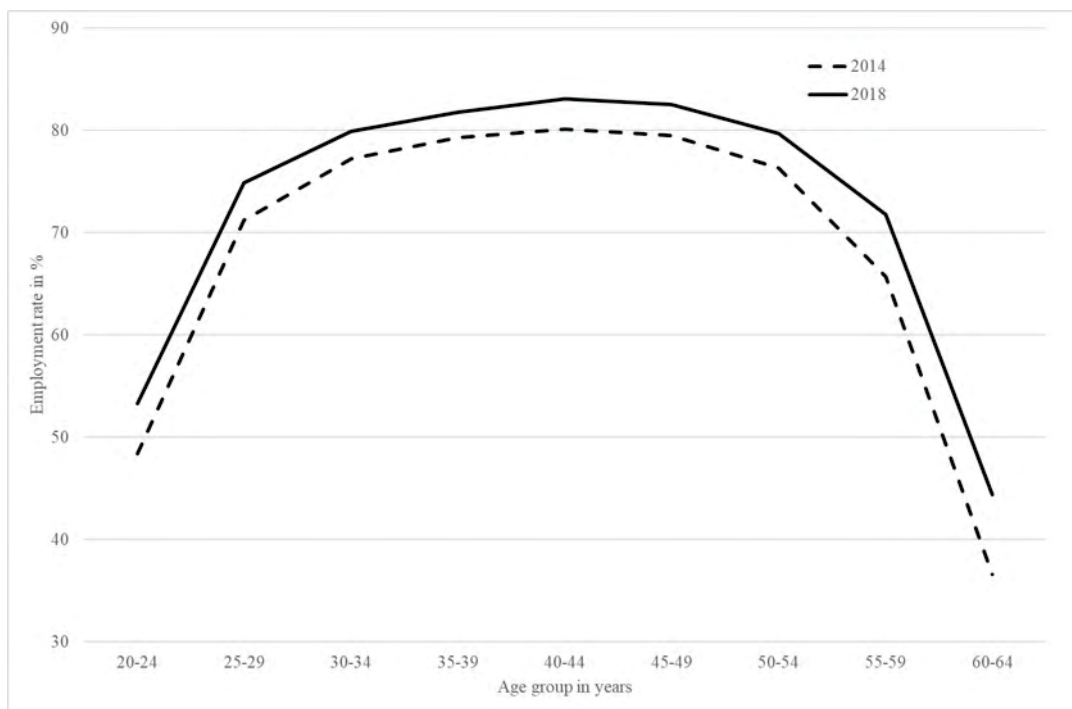
Between 2014 and 2018, the EU employment rate grew by 4.0 percentage points to 73.2%, surpassing the pre-crisis 2008 rate of 70.2% in 2015. However, **large differences in employment rate remained between Member States and also between gender and age groups**. Employment rates (in 2018) are below 70% in Belgium, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy and Romania but close to 80% or above in Czechia, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden. Employment rates, in Greece (in particular), Cyprus and Spain (marginally) were still below pre-crisis levels.

The **employment rate gap between men and women is almost 12 percentage points**. The main reason behind the employment gap between women and men is the high share of women in

inactivity (in 2018 27.6% vs. 15.7% of men). In 2014, nearly a third of inactive women aged 20-64 (29.4%) were not seeking employment due to family and caring responsibilities.

**The employment rate is correlated with age.** The highest rate is noted for the 40-44 age group (83.1% in 2018). The employment rate drops to 71.8% for the 55-59 age group and to only 44.4% for the 60-64 age group. Nevertheless, **the employment rate of the older workers has been increasing** more rapidly than the overall employment rate by 7.8% for the 60-64 age group compared to a 4.0% overall increase from 2014 to 2018 (see **Figure 3**). Active ageing, i.e. increasing the proportion of older workers still in employment remains key to achieving the overall employment target.

**Figure 3. Employment rate as function of age in 2014 and in 2018**



Source: Eurostat: lfsa\_ergan

In 2013 when the unemployment rate in the EU reached its peak (10.8%), about 20.5 million people in the 25-64 age group were unemployed. In 2018, though the unemployment rate decreased to 6.8% (below the pre-crisis level of 7.0%), there were still 16.9 million people unemployed. At the same time, the share of long-term unemployed among unemployed, though considerably down from its peak in 2014 (38.5%) was still above the pre-crisis level (35.0%; 33.4% in 2008).<sup>19</sup>

Between 2014 and 2018, as the economic situation improved, youth unemployment rates fell in all Member States and by an average of 7 percentage points at EU level. However, not all Member States saw the same degree of improvement. Over that period, the rate of young people not in employment, education or training fell from 12.5% in 2014 to 10.5% in 2018. More importantly, it fell in all countries but Germany and Denmark, where it only marginally

<sup>19</sup> Eurostat: lfsa\_upgan

increased. The improvement derives entirely from the fall in the number of unemployed young people (down 3 percentage points) as the number of inactive young people slightly increased (up 1.2 percentage points). The composition of the target population is thus shifting, with a higher share of inactive young people (58% in 2018). For young migrants (15-24 years), the unemployment rate fell from 29.2% in 2014 to 20.9% in 2018.

In 2014, 29.9 million people aged 25-64 were self-employed which corresponds to 15.3% of those employed. By 2018 the share of self-employed dropped by 1 percentage point to 14.4% which is 29.6 million people aged 25-64 years. Thus, at EU level the number of self-employed people has hardly changed since 2014, but since the total number of employed has risen significantly the share of self-employment has gone down.

It is broadly acknowledged that the success of EU businesses and industry, coupled with a fair and balanced socio-economic legal framework, is vital to increasing employment and creating new and better jobs. In 2014, there were 23.3 million SMEs in the EU-28's non-financial business economy accounting for more than 99% of all enterprises. The overwhelming majority of these (92.5% of all enterprises) were enterprises employing fewer than 10 people. By 2016 (the most recent year for which there are complete available data for the EU as whole), the number of SMEs increased to 24.7 million (still accounting for more than 99% of all enterprises in the EU's non-financial business economy) employing 94.9 million people.

### 2.2.2 Labour mobility

Labour mobility has both a geographical (place of employment) and an occupational dimension (type of work performed). Free movement of workers (geographical mobility) is one of the central tenets of EU policies. Labour mobility in the European Union is increasing. One measure of geographical mobility is the share of non-nationals in total employment<sup>20</sup>.

Between 2014 and 2018, the share of non-nationals in total employment increased from 7.1% to 8.3%<sup>21</sup>. There are very big differences between Member States. In Luxembourg, over half the employed are non-nationals while in Bulgaria, Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Romania, less than 1% of the employed persons are non-nationals. Other aspects of geographical mobility include cross-border work and commuting between regions. Occupational mobility is more difficult to define and measure but also seems to be increasing. Job tenure tends to become shorter while the age at which people leave the labour market is increasing. In the EU28, the share of long job tenures (60 months or more) declined from 62.9% in 2014 to 60.8% in 2018<sup>22</sup>. The EU28 average duration of the working life has increased by nearly one full year between 2014 (35.3 years) and 2018 (36.2 years)<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> For more statistics on mobility see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/eumove/index.html?lang=en>

<sup>21</sup> Eurostat: lfsa\_egan

<sup>22</sup> Eurostat: lfsa\_egad

<sup>23</sup> Eurostat: lfsi\_dwl\_a

### 2.2.3 Social inclusion

**The EU generally saw an improvement in living standards in 2014-2018.** This improvement is attributed in part to increases in real median income and household incomes, as well as improvements in economic activity and the labour market. Gross disposable household income has increased in real terms since 2012-2013 in nearly all Member States, although in some this has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels (notably some southern Member States)<sup>24</sup>.

Despite these positive developments, as well as the Europe 2020 target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty, over one fifth of the EU population remains at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The Europe 2020 target was set before the 2008 economic and financial crisis, which had a detrimental impact on the EU's ability to reach this target. The highest rates are found in the southern and eastern regions of the EU. The proportion of people suffering from severe material and social deprivation declined between 2014 and 2018 from 8.9% to 5.9% in the EU-28<sup>25</sup>. The proportion of people in the EU-28 experiencing severe housing deprivation slightly declined from 5% to 4% in the same period. Those who were disproportionately affected by this condition included persons at risk of poverty, tenants, households with dependent children, people in rural areas and Roma.

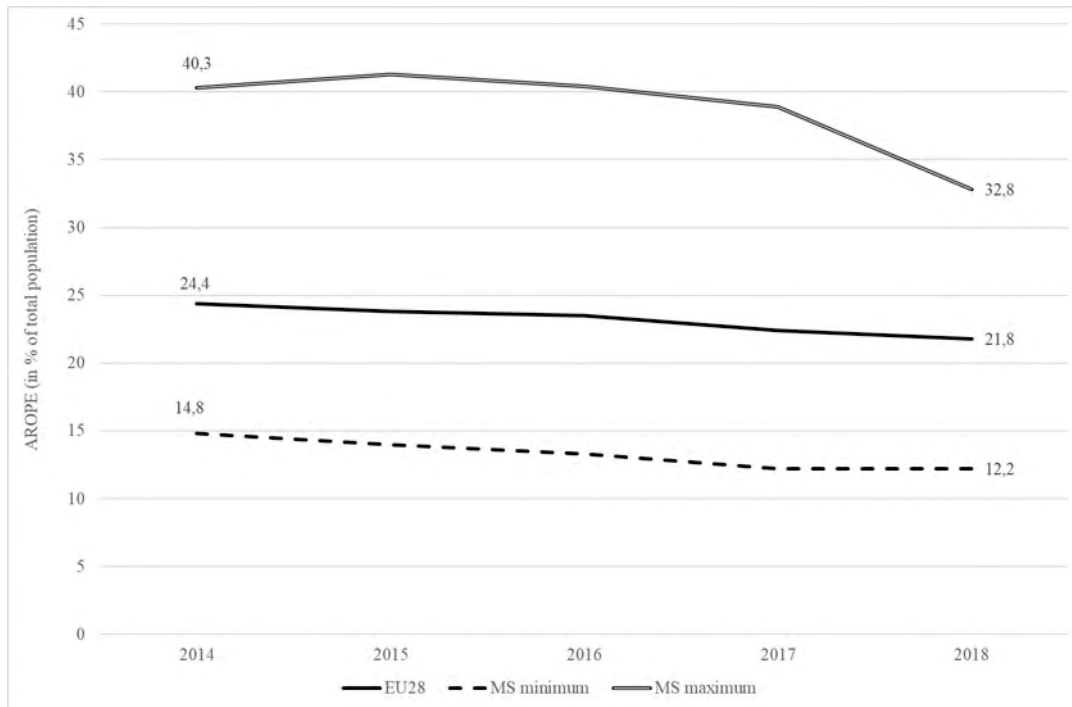
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<sup>24</sup> Employment and Social Developments in Europe – Annual Review 2018. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8110>

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat: ilc\_md07



**Figure 4. Proportion (in %) of the EU population at risk of poverty or social exclusion**



Source: Eurostat, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc\_peps01].

Notes: The middle line is the EU28 average; the outer lines represent the maximum and minimum observed at the level of the Member States.

**On access to services, the proportion of people in the EU-28 self-reporting unmet needs for medical examination declined from 6.7% to 3.6% between 2014 and 2018.** However, strong inequalities persist across certain groups of the population, with people in lower income groups, the unemployed, people with low education and people living in rural areas more likely to report unmet needs for medical examination. Across the EU-28, the reason most often cited is that it is too expensive, followed by long waiting lists. Although in 2016, 86.3% of EU children from 3 up to the minimum compulsory school age received formal early childhood education and care, this varied widely between countries, from 51.3% in Croatia to 98.6% in Belgium<sup>26</sup>.

**Although employment is generally seen as a route out of poverty, in 2018 the EU average in-work poverty rate was 9.5%, unchanged from 2014.** Groups more at risk of in-work poverty are people in households with low work intensity, single parents with dependent children, people with low education, migrants, people with a disability and young people. **Regional disparities in unemployment and the prevalence of in-work poverty persisted.** Although unemployment rates declined between 2014 and 2018, strong regional disparities persisted, notably in Belgium, Bulgaria, France and Italy.

<sup>26</sup> Eurostat: ilc\_caindformal

## 2.2.4 Education and training

**The rate of early leavers from education and training (ELET), one of the Europe 2020 headline targets, fell from 11.9% in 2013 to 10.6% in 2018<sup>27</sup> although it has still not reached the EU 2020 target (below 10% of 18-24 year olds) and rates of ELET vary significantly across Member States.** A total of 17 Member States were below the overall EU target of 10% in 2018. 16 of them had already achieved it in 2013, but reductions can be observed in almost all Member States. However, despite some improvement in the Member States that had a particularly unsatisfactory performance at the start of the period (Spain, Italy, Malta, Portugal and United Kingdom), there are still Member States that are not reaching the EU target. These include those mentioned above as well as Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Hungary and Romania.

**Tertiary education attainment, another Europe 2020 headline target, experienced steady growth during the programming period, from 37.1% in 2013 to 40.7% in 2018.** Approximately two-thirds of the Member States (18 of 28) had already achieved the EU target by 2018 (40% of 30-34 year olds have completed tertiary or equivalent education), up from 16 Member States that had achieved it in 2013. All countries made significant progress, most notably some Eastern European Member States. There are still several countries where further efforts are needed to achieve their national targets, however, including Bulgaria, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Malta, Portugal and Romania. Moreover, significant gender imbalances remain in tertiary education enrolment in specific subjects; women are underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines (e.g. in ICT, female enrolment is 18% v. 82% for men, and in engineering, manufacturing and construction it is 26.1% vs 73.9%)<sup>28</sup>.

**Regional disparities in ELET and tertiary education attainment remain significant across the EU.** Overall, 60 EU regions of 281 considered in the analysis and for which data are available, have improved their relative performance in ELET during the current programming period. 170 EU regions show relative stability while ELET performance deteriorated over the period in 51. **The challenge of reducing and preventing early leavers from education and training is still particularly substantial in several Mediterranean and Eastern European regions.** As regards tertiary education attainment, 40 regions improved their relative performance in 2013 – 2018, 184 regions remained relatively stable and the performance of 52 regions decreased. There are significant remaining challenges to improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary education in several central and eastern European regions, in Italy's south and in several Eastern German regions.

**The participation of adults in education and training increased over time,** reaching 10.1% for men and 12.1% for women in 2018. The participation of employed, unemployed and inactive persons in education and training recovered after the economic crisis and increased during the current programming period but, in this case too, there are significant disparities between countries and more than half of the Member States have a participation rate which is below the EU average.

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<sup>27</sup> The share of early school leavers is systematically higher among males and this gender disparity is not showing any signs of reduction over time.

<sup>28</sup> The main driver being possibly the persistence of man/women stereotypes in education and socio-cultural environment.

**Overall, the number of Vocational Education and Training (VET) students has been declining in the EU over the decade**, with some exceptions such as an increase of upper secondary level students in Estonia, Cyprus<sup>29</sup>, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia and the United Kingdom; post-secondary level students in Czechia and France and short-cycle tertiary level students in Sweden.

The share of students enrolled in **vocational education** are highest in post-secondary (91.5% in 2017) and short-cycle tertiary levels (86.4%). In lower secondary education, the share of VET students is low (7.4%) while in upper secondary education there is a substantial equilibrium between students in general and vocational education.

**Educational outcomes on basic skills (reading, mathematics and science), according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), also vary significantly across countries and regions, and these disparities persist, with some Member States recording a performance that is consistently below the average.** Furthermore, no improvement can be observed in PISA 2018, in the sense that the EU has not made any progress towards the **ET 2020**<sup>30</sup> benchmark on the share of low-achievers.

Finally, **the employment rate of recent graduates** increased during the 2014-2018 evaluation period, although has not fully recovered from the economic crisis. The challenges include a persistent gender gap in the employment rate of recent graduates, which has not changed substantially during the current programming period, driven by the advantage that men continue to have in entering the labour market. In 2018, for upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education graduates, the employment rate for men was 76.7% vs 71.4% for women. The gender gap was therefore 5.3 percentage points. For recent tertiary education graduates, the employment rate was 83.9% for women and 87.4% for men (gap of 3.5 percentage points in 2018).

### **3 IMPLEMENTATION / STATE OF PLAY**

#### **3.1 Programming and budget**

About EUR 130 billion are available for ESF and YEI operations in the 2014 – 2020 programming period. The EU contribution corresponds to 71% of total planned expenditure. National public and private contributions make up the balance<sup>31</sup>. The YEI is implemented through investment priority 8ii under thematic objective 8. Figure 5, below, shows the budgets per thematic objective.

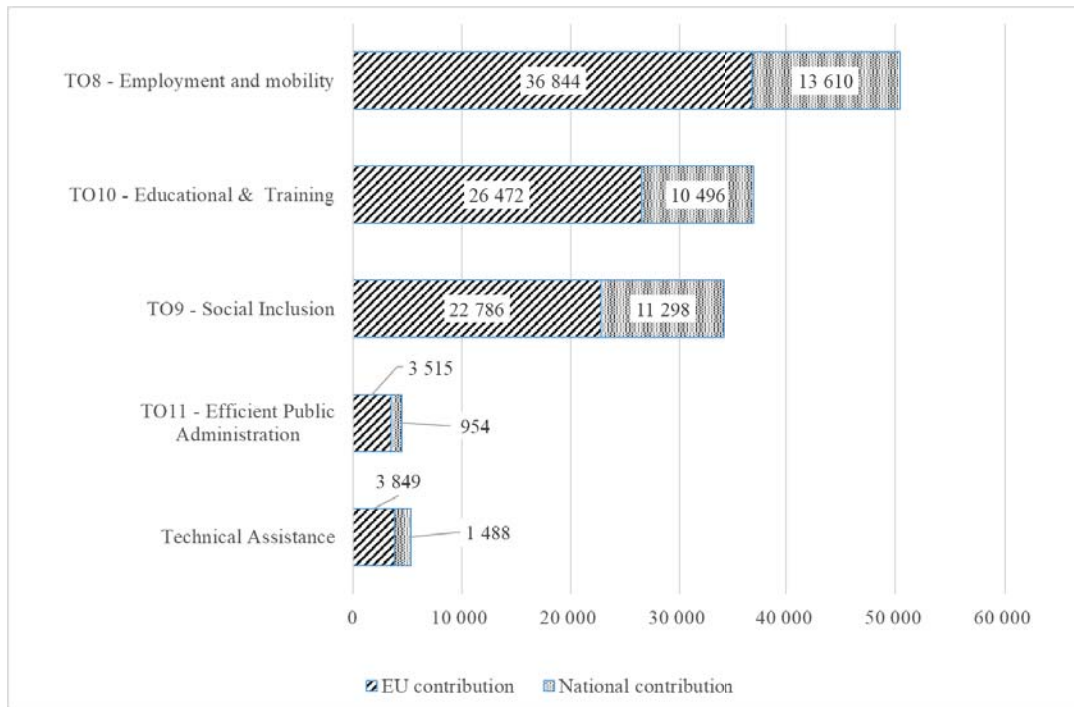
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<sup>29</sup> Although from a very low baseline rate.

<sup>30</sup> The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework_en)

<sup>31</sup> Source: Open data portal: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

**Figure 5. Total ESF and YEI budget per thematic objective - EUR millions**



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

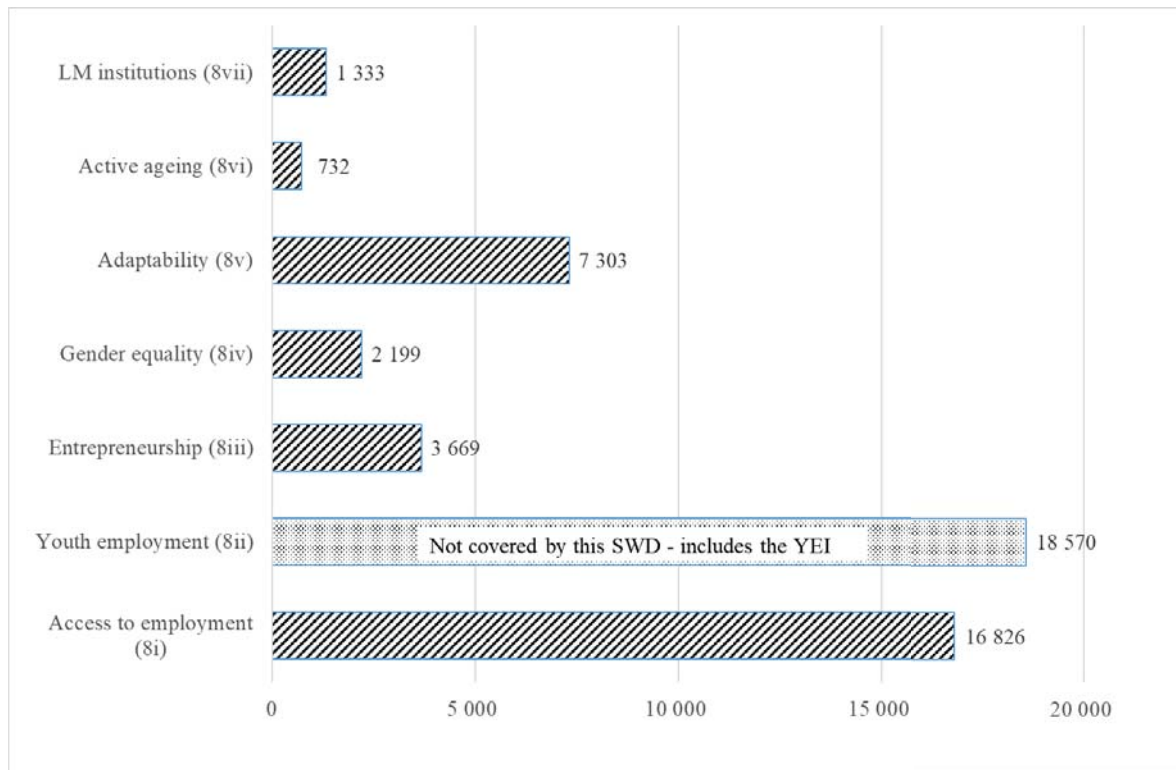
### 3.2 Employment and labour mobility

ESF support to employment and labour mobility is supported specifically (excluding youth employment support) through 151 operational programmes, in all Member States. The total allocation of these programmes, excluding 8ii<sup>32</sup>, is EUR 32.1 billion, which is the equivalent of 26% of the total ESF budget for 2014-2020. This underlines that Member States consider support for employment and labour mobility as a central objective within the ESF. Figure 6 shows the indicative allocations per investment priority<sup>33</sup>.

**Figure 6. TO8 - Indicative allocations per investment priority - in EUR millions**

<sup>32</sup> Investment priority 8ii corresponds to youth employment. The ESF support to Youth Employment staff working document can be found at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9793&furtherNews=yes>

<sup>33</sup> While mobility is mentioned explicitly in the title of TO8, there is no specific investment priority dedicated to labour mobility. In theory, Member States can programme operations towards mobility under any investment priority and it can mean different things as explained in the text above.



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

Access to employment (8i) is the dominant investment priority, absorbing more than half of the entire budget allocated to TO8 (53%) and programmed by all Member States except Denmark<sup>34</sup>. Adaptability to change (8v) is another substantial priority, corresponding to EUR 7.3 billion (23%). It is particularly important in Germany (EUR 2.2 billion) and France (EUR 1.3 billion), where it represents over half of the total TO8 investments.

The ESF TO8 actions in transition regions is comparatively less focused on access to employment (44%; EU average 53%). These regions spend more on entrepreneurship (17%) and adaptability (33%). Programmes in less developed regions concentrate comparatively less on adaptability (16%; 23%), to favour access to employment.

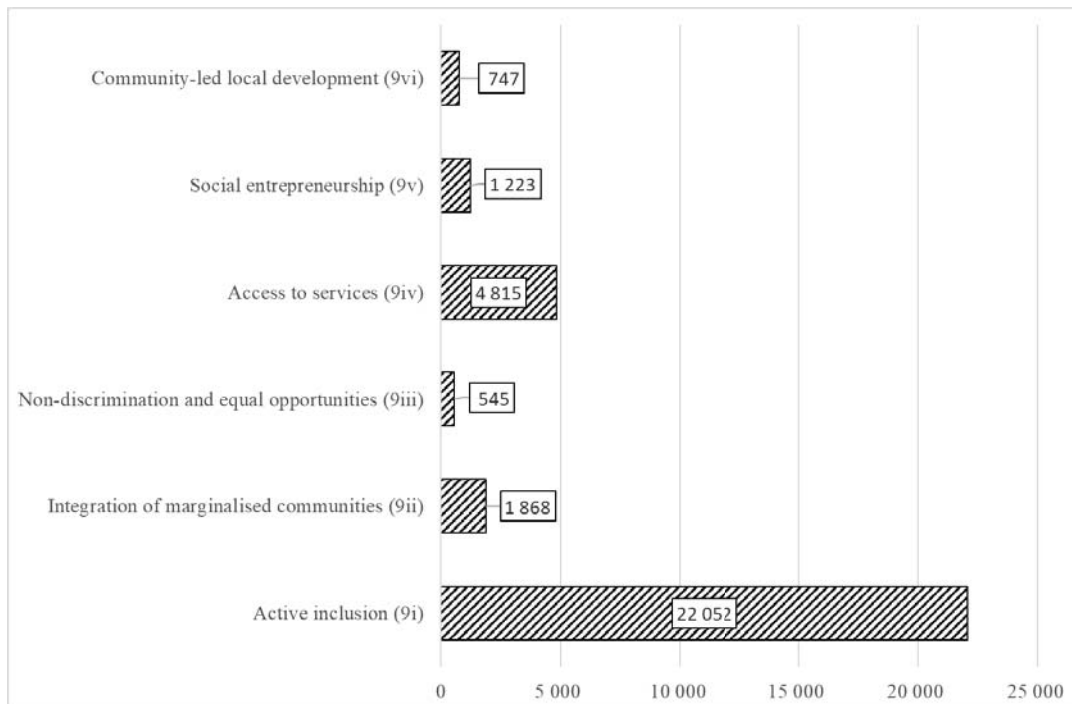
### 3.3 Social inclusion

In the current programming period TO9 operations are financed by 145 operational programs financing covering all Member States 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. The absolute amounts planned vary considerably across Member States, from EUR 8 million in Luxembourg to EUR 4.0 billion in Germany. The total amounts planned for TO9 as percentage of total ESF does range from 20% in Finland to over 70% in the Netherlands. These budgets have remained relatively stable in 2014-2018, with a slight overall increase of less than 1%. The biggest increases in absolute terms were in Greece. **Figure 7**

<sup>34</sup> Note that youth employment (formally also addressed by thematic objective 8) is excluded from these figures, since this is the subject of a separate evaluation.

**7. TO9 - Indicative allocation by investment priority - in EUR millions** shows the indicative allocation per investment priority.

**Figure 7. TO9 - Indicative allocation by investment priority - in EUR millions**



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

Similar amounts are allocated to less developed regions (43%) and to more developed regions (42%). The balance (15%) goes to transition regions. Looking at investment priorities (**Figure 7**), 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. 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).

### 3.4 Education and training

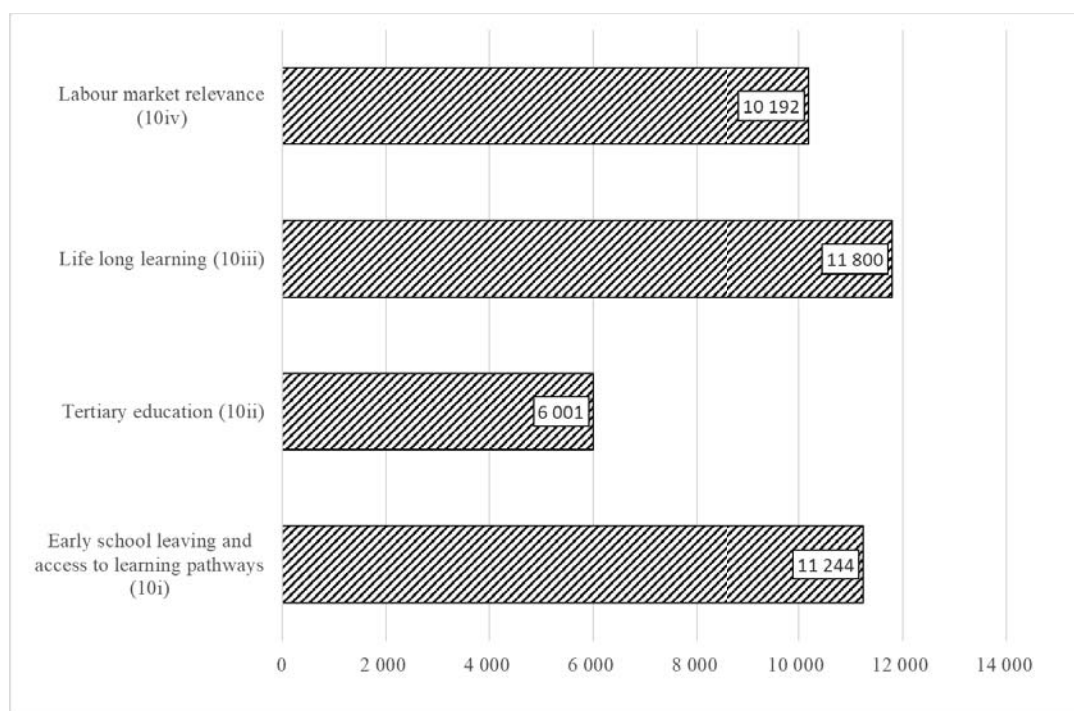
Total planned expenditure on TO10 in the current programming period is approximately EUR 39.2 billion (including EU and national co-financing). This corresponds to nearly one third of total ESF (32%). The amounts planned vary considerably across Member States, from EUR 5 472.8 million in Italy to EUR 8 million in Luxembourg and zero in the Netherlands. The total amounts planned on TO10 as a percentage of total ESF range from a maximum of 53% in Portugal, to a minimum of 15% in Cyprus, ignoring the Netherlands.

Planned expenditure on TO10 relating to public spending on education is significant in several EU countries. For example, total TO10 is 7.1% of general government expenditure on

education<sup>35</sup> in Portugal, 4.2% in Romania and 4.1% in Poland. TO10 is also important in the Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Hungary and, Slovakia.

More than half of the total TO10 funds, 51.4%, goes to less developed regions, 34.8% to more developed regions and 13.7% to transition regions. Looking at investment priorities (see **Figure 8**), around 29% (EUR 711.24billion) is planned on 10i (early leavers from education and training), 15% (6 billion) on 10ii (tertiary education), 30% (11.8 billion) on 10iii (lifelong learning) and 26% (10.19 billion) on 10iv (labour market relevance).

**Figure 8. TO10 - Indicative allocations by investment priority - in EUR millions**



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

Several Member States have selected all investment priorities, but only a few (such as Portugal) have a fairly equal distribution of funds across all. Many Member States decided to concentrate on a limited number. For instance, France focuses on 10iii and 10i, the United Kingdom on 10iii and 10iv, Belgium, Slovenia and Sweden on 10iii, and Czechia on 10i and 10ii.

Between 2016 and 2018 there were changes in ESF resources planned under TO10. Overall, in the EU, there was a 0.1% increase in total planned resources (EU and national co-financing). Looking at the ESF component only, the positive change between 2016 and 2018 was EUR +262.6 million (+1%). However, considering that the total net increase (EU and national co-financing) was much smaller and amounted approximately to EUR 55 million between 2016 and 2018, the observed positive change in planned ESF (i.e. EUR 262.2 million) was clearly compensated by a reduction in national resources.

<sup>35</sup> Annual average for 2014-2018.

In absolute values, the biggest increases (considering both EU and national co-financing) took place in Spain (EUR +300.7 million) and Greece (EUR +182.3 million) while the largest reductions were recorded in the United Kingdom (EUR -322 million) and Italy (EUR -116.4 million) where, however, there was a 32.6 million increase in EU resources planned under TO10<sup>36</sup>.

### 3.5 Typology of Operations funded

#### 3.5.1 ESF support to employment and labour mobility

The supporting study conducted a mapping of the types of operations. **ESF TO8 operations combining types of operations are the most common and represent 18% of the costs.** Support for entrepreneurs is also around 18%, closely followed by guidance and support (12%), adaptability (14%), and financial incentives (10%).

**Of investments in the area of entrepreneurship (8iii), 99% consist of operations that provide some sort of support for entrepreneurs.** Likewise, adaptability operations are basically only found within the adaptability investment priority (8v), where these operations represent half of the reported eligible costs. **Operations in support of active ageing dominate the active ageing investment priority** (66% of that investment priority's costs), while operations that seek to **strengthen institutional capacity represent 84% of the costs reported** for the investment priority on labour market institutions (8vii). **For access to employment**, a variety of types of operation can be found, **such as guidance and support (20%), financial incentives (17%), education and training (8%), and a considerable share of operations that combine multiple types (30%).**

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<sup>36</sup> In percentage terms, the most significant changes which can be observed between 2016 and 2018 are those concerning Cyprus, where there was a 34.6% reduction, and to a lesser extent Denmark (-8.9%) and the UK (-8.6%). Conversely, in Greece there was a 14.9% increase and in Spain a 10.5% increase. Overall, the distribution of funds across IPs did not vary considerably.



**Table 1. Types of operations per investment priority – TO8**

Type of operation	Programmed under						
	Total TO8 (excl. 8ii)	Access to employment (8i)	Entrepreneurship (8iii)	Gender equality (8iv)	Adaptability (8v)	Active ageing (8vi)	LM institutions (8vii)
Work-based learning	4%	5%			7%		
Education & training	7%	8%		10%	9%		8%
Guidance & support	12%	20%			7%		
Financial incentives	10%	17%		3%	2%		
Support Entrepreneur	18%	3%	99%	3%	7%		
Institutional capacity	4%	4%			1%		84%
Women in employment	5%	1%		80%	1%		
Adaptability	14%	1%			55%	1%	
Active ageing	2%				2%	66%	
Integrated pathways	6%	10%		2%	3%		3%
Other							
Combined	18%	30%		2%	5%	33%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100% <sup>37</sup>	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: mapping by authors, based on qualitative screening of the annual implementation reports 2015-2018.

Mapping of all operations under TO8 shows that in practice almost all mobility operations can be found under the ‘Access to employment’ (8i), and to a lesser extent in support to labour market institutions (8vii). Investments targeting labour market institutions are relatively small, with an overall investment of EUR 1.3 billion. These investments include support for labour market institutions to improve their provision of labour mobility services (e.g. through EURES).

### 3.5.2 Social inclusion

Social Inclusion operations are **complex, highly diverse and delivered to a range of vulnerable groups** as well as entities. There is **significant overlap between investment priorities** under TO9. The definition of 9i is broad and actions may more easily fit within it than under other more narrowly defined investment priorities such as 9v. As a result, most operational programmes covered 9i.

The supporting study on social inclusion<sup>38</sup> 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 people and to organisations or society at large (e.g. capacity building of social services, support to social enterprises, information campaigns). **Table 2** below presents the six types of operations and their prevalence across the operational programmes, including TO9 actions.

<sup>37</sup> All other types of operations that support entrepreneurship amount cumulatively to 1%.

<sup>38</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

**Table 2. Types of operations per investment priority - TO9**

Type of operation	Main target groups	Number of operational programmes	programmed under						
			9i	9ii	9iii	9iv	9v	9vi	
1	Employment-focused actions	• people with a disability • LTU <sup>39</sup>	136	95%	12%	6%	1%		9%
2	Enhance basic skills	• LTU • people with a disability • Low skilled	29	69%	17%	14%			
3	Basic school education	• people with a disability • LTU • Recipients of minimum income	25	32%	48%	20%			
4	Access to services	• people with a disability • LTU	97	54%	22%	21%	68%	1%	2%
5	Social entrepreneurship	• people with a disability • SMEs, social enterprises	75	25%				67%	12%
6	Actions influencing attitudes and systems		79	47%	19%	16%	41%	25%	9%

Source: mapping by authors, based on qualitative screening of the annual implementation reports 2015-2018.

This pattern of prevalence of investment priorities and types of operations across the operational programmes is also reflected in terms of finances. **Investment priority 9i accounts for 71% of indicative TO9 allocations, 73% of the planned allocation and 80% of the declared expenditure.** This concentration on one investment priority is less marked at the level of the types of operations. The operations aiming to move participants in employment (type 1) are the most important. They represent 45% of the planned allocations and 48% of the declared expenditure.

Investment priority 9vi (community-led local development, CLLD) is a very specific case. CLLD is an instrument to involve local private and public actors and to propose integrated, local solutions. In total, 14 Member States plan the use of CLLD, combining ESF and other ESI Funds resources, mostly EARDF<sup>40</sup>. Investment priority 9vi accounts for 2.4% of the indicative TO9 allocations, 1% of the planned allocations and only 0.2% of the declared expenditure.

### 3.5.3 Education and training

The analysis of the operations financed by ESF under TO10 highlighted that **secondary and post-secondary education** and training is the most important area of intervention in financial terms. Overall, 28.3% of total eligible costs are related to operations supporting *vocational secondary* education and training, and a similar share, 27.4% of the total supports *general secondary* education and training.

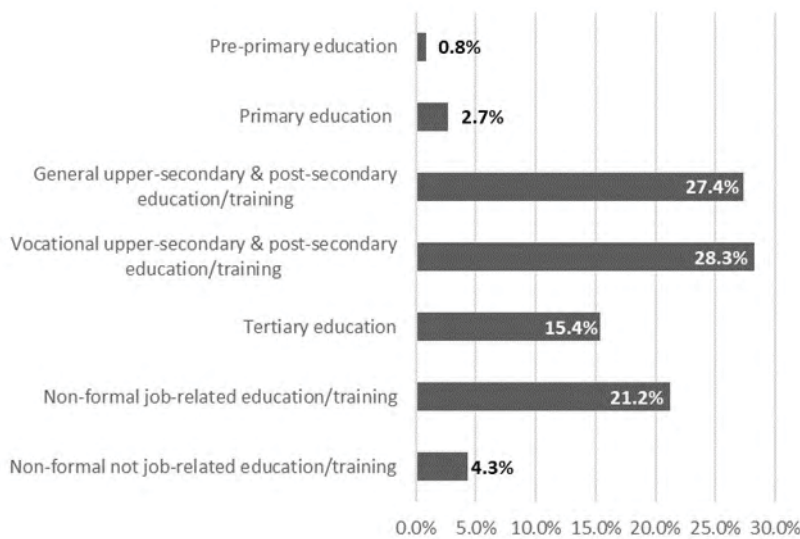
<sup>39</sup> Long-term unemployed

<sup>40</sup> See paper presented at the 2019 Leader conference. <https://leaderconference2019.minhaterra.pt/rwst/files/1119-CLLDX231219XSERVILLOXKAH.PDF>

As regards the other areas of intervention, 21.2% is allocated to **non-formal job-related** education and training and 4.3% to **non-formal non job-related** education and training; 15.4% of the total went to tertiary education and 3.5% is allocated, altogether, to **pre-primary and primary education** (see **Figure 9** below).

The distribution of funds by area of operation varies considerably between Member States. For example, more than 50% of the funds are allocated to vocational secondary and post-secondary education and training in Cyprus, Austria and Portugal while the focus is on general (lower and upper) secondary education and training in Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia and Romania. Non-formal job-related education and training prevail in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Slovenia, Finland and the United Kingdom, while non-formal non job-related education has an important role in Ireland. Tertiary education is central in Croatia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland, while pre-primary and primary education are significant in Czechia.

**Figure 9. Distribution of thematic objective 10 eligible costs by area of operation**



Source: mapping by authors, based on qualitative screening of the annual implementation reports 2015-2018.

The distribution of funds by area of operation varies also across investment priorities. Under 10i, 68.2% of total resources are allocated to support general secondary and post-secondary education and training. 20.1% of total allocations go to vocational secondary and post-secondary education and training and 8.6% to primary education. Under 10ii, most resources, 86.7%, go to tertiary education operations, followed by non-formal job-related education and training (9.1% of the total).

Under 10iii, funds are concentrated on non-formal job-related education and training (53.8%), while 31% go altogether to vocational, general secondary, post-secondary education and training, and 13% to non-formal non job-related education and training. As regards 10iv, funds are mostly used for vocational secondary and post-secondary education and training (72.1% of total). 14.6% is used for non-formal job-related education and training, and 4.9% for tertiary education.

### 3.6 Financial and operational implementation

The performance review foreseen by the Common Provisions Regulation was carried out in 2019. It examined the achievement of the milestones for financial and output indicators as reported in the 2018 annual implementation reports submitted by Member States in 2019<sup>41</sup>. Across all thematic objectives, ESF performing priorities represented 83% of the performance reserve for the ESF (i.e. EUR 4.2 billion) that is definitively allocated on the basis of Commission decisions on the performance review. However, there are important differences between Member States and programmes. Nine Member States managed to achieve all their ESF milestones. On the contrary, in some Member States, most priority axes have not achieved their milestones. This is the case in Romania, for example.

There were also large differences between thematic objectives. In absolute terms, the highest amount to reallocate concerned TO9 social inclusion, TO10 education and training and multi-TO priorities<sup>42</sup>. TO8 employment performed well both in absolute and relative terms with an achievement rate of around 90%.

At the end of 2018, the number of non-performing priority axes was high, about one fifth, and far beyond what was expected in light of the programme amendments adopted in previous years. It demonstrates, inter-alia, that the setting of milestones and the selection of the indicators are very challenging. The European Court of Auditors found that for around one quarter of the indicators included in the performance framework of the examined operational programmes (28 %) it was not possible to draw conclusions about the accuracy of the target value for the milestone, either because the calculation methodology could not be verified or because there was no detailed explanation of the unit costs or the assumptions made. It considered that around 18 % of the remaining milestones and target values are not realistic and achievable or insufficiently ambitious. Taken together this means that in around 46 % doubts remain as to the milestones specified for releasing the performance reserve<sup>43</sup>.

Financial implementation as measured by the ratio of interim payments to the Member States in relation to the total allocation is running slower than at a comparable time in the previous programming period. In May 2013, this ratio was approaching 50%. It is just over one third in May 2020. The main reasons for this delay in implementation include the late adoption of the Regulations, and a more relaxed automatic de-commitment rule<sup>44</sup> (a move from a combination of N+2 and N+3 in 2007-2013, to a general N+3 for all Member States in 2014-2020).

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<sup>41</sup> All figures in this section cover the whole ESF and the YEI.

<sup>42</sup> However, in relative terms, compared to the total allocation by TO, the most significant short-coming concerns TO11 institutional capacity. This thematic objective is not covered by this staff working document.

<sup>43</sup> ECA special report No 15. Available at: [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR17\\_15/SR\\_PARTNERSHIP\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR17_15/SR_PARTNERSHIP_EN.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> The funds allocated have to be spent within 2 or 3 years of their allocation, failing that they are not available anymore,

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 Short description of methodology

Three separate supporting studies were contracted out (one corresponding to each thematic objective)<sup>45</sup>. The evaluation questions specific to each supporting study, derived from the better regulation evaluation criteria, were broken down into a number of sub-questions for each thematic objective and agreed with the corresponding inter-service groups. The studies applied an appropriate mix of evaluation methods. This includes desk research, public consultations, case studies, modelling, interviews with stakeholders and Member States' officials and focus groups. They are explained in further detail in Annex C to this staff working document. The results of the three twelve-week public consultations can be found in annex 2.

### 4.2 Limitations and robustness of findings

The findings and conclusions are reasonably robust, since they are based on sufficient triangulation of sources and tools, such as the data reported by the monitoring systems, stakeholder consultation, case studies.... However, the evaluation also faced several limitations, notably:

- **Data quality and timeliness.** The figures in this SWD are based on the situation as reported by the Member States in the annual implementation reports for 2018. The cut-off date for all data is thus 31 December 2018. During the process of examination and acceptance of the annual implementation reports, corrections to the data may be made. This explains small differences in figures in the supporting studies as the data were extracted from the electronic data exchange platform at different times.
- **Detailed programme information is usually not available.** The ESF is funding thousands of projects or operations, sometimes even very small ones, each having their own logic, implementation partners and procedures.
- **Demarcation of operations focused on employment and labour mobility from those focused on youth employment (covered by a separate SWD<sup>46</sup>).** Although youth employment operations are mainly funded under 8ii, they can be found across other investment priorities.
- **Public consultations** which by nature **cannot be considered as representative** by definition, although some mitigation measures have been applied, notably triangulation with other data sources.

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<sup>45</sup> The final reports of the three studies are available at:

- TO8 – Employment and labour mobility: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8330&furtherPubs=yes>
- TO9 – Social Inclusion: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>
- TO10 – Education and training: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>46</sup> See Youth Employment staff working document: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9793&furtherNews=yes>

- Towards the end of the field work, holding **focus groups** in the Member States **and** at EU level became impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead EU level **Delphi surveys**<sup>47</sup> were held instead.
- **Data for comparative analysis of the socio-economic context**, notably SILC data, were sometimes only available till 2017.
- **Cost effectiveness analyses**, including the attempts to conduct cost benefit analyses, are affected by timeliness and completeness of data, due to delayed and non-simultaneous reporting on outputs, results and costs.
- **Counterfactual impact evaluations**<sup>48</sup> were used only for a small number of operations<sup>49</sup>. The main limitation is that the results cannot be extrapolated to the whole of the ESF. They also inform about the effect of treatment single intervention, not about the ESF as such.
- **Rhomolo analysis**, like all general equilibrium models, need to be based on a number of simplifying assumptions, although it is a high-quality and mature model very well-suited for estimating macroeconomic impacts.
- **COVID-19 pandemic**. *The fieldwork for the studies supporting this SWD was carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Europe. This is not a limitation to assess the 2014-2018 period as such. It does present challenges to assess the relevance of ESF support in the current context.*

Annex 3 to this SWD explains in more detail how these limitations were dealt with.

## 5 ANALYSIS AND ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

### 5.1 Effectiveness

#### 5.1.1 Financial and output achievements

At the end of 2018, financial execution<sup>50</sup> was 7% lower than at a comparable moment in the previous programming period (20% versus 27% at the end of 2011). However, this was due to expenditure declarations (from final beneficiaries to Member States authorities and from Member States to the Commission) rather than commitments or project selection on the ground, where levels were comparable to those in 2007-2013<sup>51</sup>. The delay in terms of claims submitted by MS is only 4.24% (accumulated between 2014 and 2017). In fact, proportionally

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<sup>47</sup> The Delphi survey is a technique that relies on successive rounds of interactions with a panel of experts. The experts answer questionnaires in two or more rounds. After each round, a facilitator or change agent provides an anonymised summary of the experts' reactions from the previous round as well as the reasons they provided for their judgments. The objective is to build consensus on a number of issues. The method was originally developed to produce forecasts.

<sup>48</sup> These methods estimate the net impact of a treatment by comparing the situation for the participants of an intervention with that of non-participants.

<sup>49</sup> Pilot and feasibility study on the sustainability and effectiveness of results for European Social Fund participants using counterfactual impact evaluations. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/84cc9eb9-b33d-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>50</sup> Financial execution is the ratio of interim payments made by the Commission to Member States to the total amount allocated.

<sup>51</sup> By July 2020 (latest data available) the overall ESF/YEI project selection rate was 92% of total programmes allocation.

more claims were received in 2018 (13.2%) for the 2014-20 period than in 2011 (12.92%) for the 2007-13 period.

Financial implementation was, on average, comparable across the three thematic objectives. There was however, considerable variation between Member States, regions, operational programmes, investment priorities and actions types. Other things being equal, ESF implementation tended to be slower in less developed regions, a notable exception being the TO10 (education and training) operations in Portugal.

Project selection rates<sup>52</sup> up to 2018 were similar, 72% for TO8 (employment and mobility), 71% for TO9 (social inclusion) and 69% for TO10 (education and training) (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Project selection rates**

Project selection rate (in %)	TO8 (employment and labour mobility)	TO9 (social inclusion)	TO10 (education and training)
EU average	72	71	69
Range per investment priority	38-77	26-77	64-70
Range per Member State	58-111	48-114	26-144

Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

These similar average rates hide considerable differences across Member States and investment priorities. Globally, the differences between thematic objectives (TOs) within Member States were limited. The major exceptions were Bulgaria, Slovakia and Romania. Six Member States (Ireland, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta and the Netherlands) had basically already engaged the full allocated amounts by the end of 2018 across all thematic objectives. In the other Member States, there was a clear difference between thematic objectives. For instance, Bulgaria and Slovakia had fully allocated the planned amounts for TO8 but only a third of the amount for TO10, with TO9 being in between. The project selection rates were generally higher for TO8. In Italy, Poland, Portugal and Finland, the highest selection rates were for TO10. The highest project selection rates in Germany, Austria and Romania were for TO9.

The absorption rates, defined as the proportion of expenditure claimed by beneficiaries to allocated resources, were still relatively low (see **Table 4**). In three Member States, the absorption was very low, less than 10 % for TO9 (Ireland) and TO8 (Romania), a TO10 (Slovakia, Romania).

<sup>52</sup> This is the ratio of funds allocated by the managing authority to specific projects or operations to the total amount available (by TO) or indicatively planned (by IP).

**Table 4. Absorption rates**

Declared expenditure rate (in %)	TO8 (employment and mobility)	TO9 (social inclusion)	TO10 (education and training)
EU average	33	28	27
Range per investment priority	16-41	3-32	21-32
Range per Member State	7-53	5-68	6-45

Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

The beginning of the programming period coincided with the aftermaths of the economic and financial crisis. Across all thematic objectives, the focus of implementation has been on tackling urgent challenges related to the employment crisis, partly at the expense of more structural longer-term policies. The econometric analysis carried out for TO8 (employment and mobility) indicates that the reduction of unemployment rates in certain countries/regions was associated with lower financial progress, further stressing the fact that in several Member States the improvement of labour market conditions resulted in a reduction of the pace of financial implementation.

A person can participate more in than one in ESF project. Therefore the number reported is of participations, not participants. In total, there were 22.2 million participations over the 2014-2018 period (see **Table 5**). The differences in participant profiles across thematic objectives is largely in line with what can be expected. TO10 (education and training) had a higher proportion of inactive young persons. TO8 (employment and mobility) focused on the unemployed. The highest proportions of people with a disability, people with a migrant background or minorities and people with other disadvantages were recorded for TO9 (social inclusion).

**Table 5. Participant profiles**

	TO8 (IP8ii excluded)	TO9	TO10	Total ESF/YEI <sup>53</sup>
Participations (in millions)	6,9	6,2	9,1	26,3
of which				
Employed	25%	15%	25%	20%
Unemployed	68%	53%	10%	44%
Long term unemployed	23%	24%	3%	16%
Inactive	7%	31%	66%	36%
Women	54%	52%	51%	52%
Young people (16-24 years)	15%	22%	69%	43%
Older workers (55-64 years)	11%	11%	4%	7%
Low skilled (ISCED 1-2)	33%	54%	61%	48%

<sup>53</sup> The differences can be attributed to IP8ii (youth employment) and TO 11 (institutional capacity) which are not covered by this staff working document.

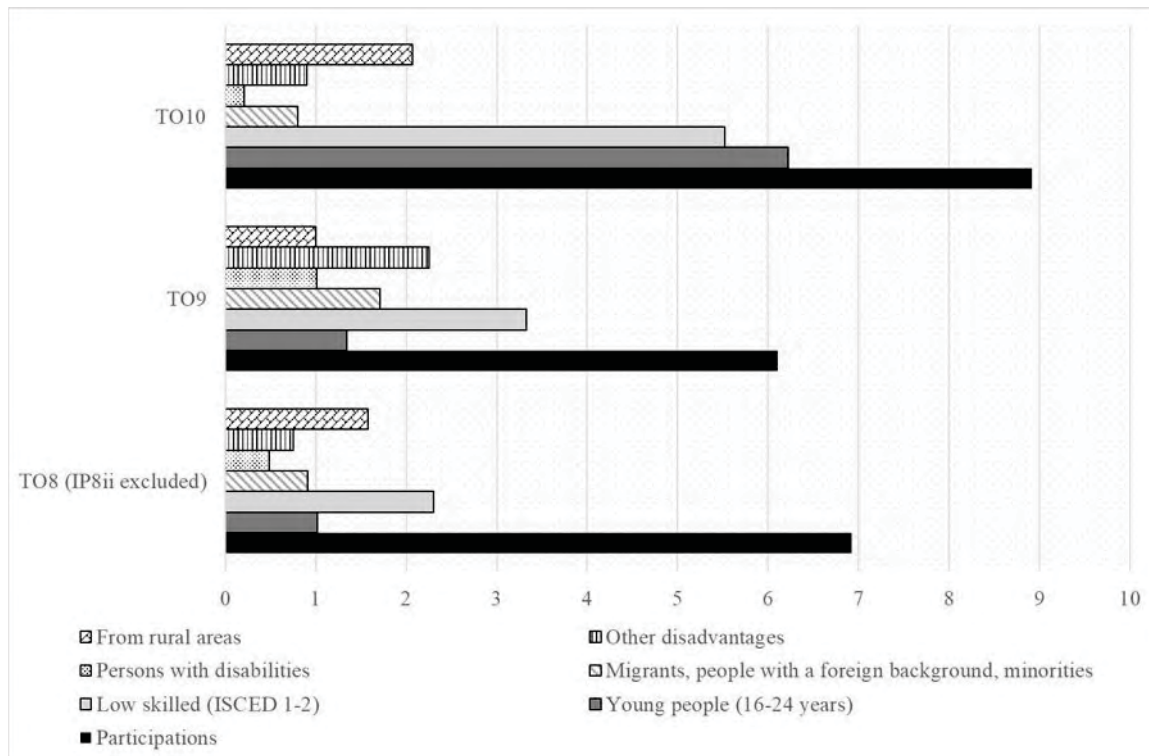


Migrants, people with a foreign background, minorities**	13%	28%	9%	15%
People with disabilities**	7%	16%	3%	7%
Other disadvantages**	11%	37%	11%	17%
Homeless or affected by housing exclusion	1%	4%	0%	1%
From rural areas	23%	16%	23%	21%

Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

The collection of some types of data has proven problematic. The data marked \*\* in Table 5 are in special categories defined under Article 8 of Directive 95/46/EC. Data on sensitive characteristics were not collected consistently in some Member States (for instance Portugal collected data on disability only in operations targeted to disabled people). The data on homelessness and rural areas were estimated based on sampling and reported only once.

**Figure 10. Number of participations by selected characteristic and thematic objective**



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

Access to employment operations (investment priority 8i) significantly over performed other investment priorities under thematic objective 8 (employment and mobility). The employment-focused operations under thematic objective 9 (social inclusion) 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). Based on progress measured against common output indicators, activities under investment priority 10i (early leavers from education and training and access to learning pathways) and 10iii (lifelong learning) have

generally performed better than activities under the other thematic objective 10 (education and training) investment priorities.

Regarding TO8, progress towards result targets set to be achieved by 2023 was relatively in line with the progress towards output targets. Operations related to access to employment made more progress towards their result targets than other investment priorities. By the end of 2018, an average of 55% of all result targets have been achieved at EU level (42% if weighted by actual size of the targets). Progress in transition regions (38%) was considerably lower than in less developed (56%) and more developed regions (61%). Progress in Cyprus and Sweden was somewhat of an outlier, due to possibly incorrect target settings. Progress towards the result targets was relatively modest in Bulgaria, Ireland, Croatia and Malta, and has not yet been reported for Romania. Overall, adaptability investments showed a similar progress towards the targets, though it was also influenced by a number of outliers (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary). Progress towards the result targets for investment in entrepreneurship, gender equality, active ageing and labour market institutions was slightly lower, varying between 30% and 40%. While slightly lower than for other investment priorities, these figures are within the acceptable limits.

For TO9 (social inclusion), most targets were set against programme specific indicators. The average achievement rate for specific output indicators<sup>54</sup> was 99%, meaning that on average, the targets set for the end of the programming period (2023) were already achieved by the end of 2018 (see Table 6). The achievement rates for specific output indicators under TO10 were a bit lower. There was also less variation between investment priorities and Member States indicating more even implementation.

**Table 6. Achievement rates for specific output indicators**

SOI achievement rates (in % of 2023 targets)	TO8 (employment and labour mobility) excluding IP8ii	TO9 (social inclusion)	TO10 (education and training)
EU average	59	99	79
Range per investment priority	24%-90	19 -118	44-87
Range per Member State	2%-279	1 -540	3-108

Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

However, progress towards set targets, including performance framework milestones, may not be a very reliable indication of implementation performance. Targets were often set far too low, making it easy to overshoot them sometimes even by multiples. On the other hand some achievement rates were very low. The most likely explanations are that: (i) targets were not realistic, (ii) implementation had barely started when progress was measured or (iii) reporting was not reliable.

### 5.1.2 Findings on results and contribution to overarching objectives

There has been **good progress on results achieved from participation in ESF funded operations**, with a total of 9.5 million positive results by December 2018 (this includes

<sup>54</sup> This is the ratio of achievements to targets for specific output indicators with targets.

participants who engaged in job searching or found a job, were in employment including self-employment; entered education/training, or gained a qualification (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Reported results (common result indicators only; upon leaving and after six months)**

(Figures in thousands)	TO8 (IP8ii excluded)	TO9	TO10	Total (ESF & YEI)
<b>Results upon leaving</b>				
Inactive participants engaged in job search	31	309	155	862
Participants in education or training	185	289	792	1 695
Participants gaining a qualification	697	365	2 222	3 949
Participants in employment	1 389	697	210	3 153
Disabled participants with positive result	611	1 202	630	2 950
<b>Total immediate common result indicators</b>	<b>2 303</b>	<b>1 659</b>	<b>3 380</b>	<b>9 660</b>
<b>Results at six months</b>	-	-	-	-
Participants in employment	1 595	1 118	338	4 105
Participants with improved labour market situation	269	167	208	734
Older workers in employment	106	62	10	213
Disadvantaged in employment, in education or training or gaining a qualification	316	722	84	1 489
<b>Total results at six months</b>	<b>1 864</b>	<b>1 284</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>4 839</b>

Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>

It is impossible to disentangle the impact of ESF funding from other factors. However, evidence shows that the actual **contribution of ESF operations** towards the EU 2020 targets is **clearly positive, both from a micro and a macro perspective**. This assessment is based on results achievements, qualitative evidence from stakeholder views and micro and macro econometric modelling.

As regards **employment and labour mobility support (TO8)** the most outstanding result was the 1.6 million participants in employment after 6 months, **contributing to the labour market integration of the unemployed**. In terms of investment priorities, **access to employment (8i)** operations made more progress towards their result targets than others, also according to stakeholders, followed by **support to self-employment/entrepreneurship (8iii)**. This confirms that in the first years of ESF implementation, most of the focus was on fighting high unemployment levels and less attention was paid to more structural long-term policies. Evidence of the effects of ESF support shows that these have been mostly positive, though typically stronger for people furthest from the labour market and for women. These quantitative findings are underpinned qualitatively by stakeholders' views, including on soft outcomes (e.g. increased self-confidence, motivation, active engagement and cooperation). In addition, effects are generally more positive and stronger in regions that: (i) are net receivers of EU support, (ii) have a larger labour supply and (iii) have a stronger export orientation. Many of these are in Belgium, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Slovakia, as well as, to some extent, the United Kingdom.

ESF support to **social inclusion** has contributed to progress made towards achieving of Europe 2020 target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty<sup>55</sup>. 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%)<sup>56</sup>.

**ESF support to education and training resulted in notable contributions to progress towards achieving the Europe 2020 education and training targets.** Based on the available data, over 4.34 million participants (46% of total) achieved positive results from participation in ESF support to education and training (50% of participants with such results are women). The majority of positive results related to gaining a qualification upon leaving (3.3 million) or engaging in education and training. **Stronger results success is seen for early leavers from education and training (10i) and lifelong learning (10iii),** in line with the finding that Member States have been effective in their use of ESF funds to support national and regional strategic priorities in these areas. **However, many Member States have faced challenges related to achieving positive results under ESF tertiary education (10ii) operations.** The country reviews suggested that only Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland and Portugal were on course to achieve their output and result targets under this investment priority.<sup>57</sup> Particular achievements are highlighted in the country reviews and case studies (see them in the TO10 supporting study).

Further evidence is provided by **stakeholder views**, which consider that ESF operations have played a key role in helping the EU reach its headline targets in education, contributing particularly to the drop in the proportion of early leavers from education and training and the rise in participation in adult learning. For instance, managing authorities intermediate bodies and public respondents to the public consultation considered that the ESF's contribution was

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<sup>55</sup> The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the EU decreased from about 122 million in 2014 to 110 million in 2018 – a decrease of about 12 million.

<sup>56</sup> The total number of responses to these questions was 486. There was little difference between stakeholder types.

<sup>57</sup> Since 2014 there has been a general improvement in the proportion of the population completing tertiary education (especially in some eastern European countries such as Czechia and Slovakia). However there is limited evidence from the evaluation that links general improvements in tertiary education participation with the role of ESF.

either ‘very effective’ or ‘mostly effective’ in supporting the development of work-based learning systems and improving access to lifelong learning opportunities (69.2%; N=104). The responses to the open-ended public consultation questions also suggested that the focus on prevention and early intervention was beneficial in reducing school drop-out rates.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, there are also some examples of positive impacts on early leavers from education and training and lifelong learning based on **counterfactual evidence** to show what would have happened without intervention (for example in Spain and the United Kingdom)<sup>59</sup>. However limited impact studies have been completed to date.

At this stage of the programming period, the ability of quantitative analysis to show the overall effects of ESF operations on reaching Europe 2020 targets is limited. However, it is already clear that **ESF support for the development of system level changes and sustainable innovative measures can have a significant long-term impact**. Qualitative evidence (country-based analyses including case studies) suggests that ESF support to social inclusion also has **broader level impacts** including improved access to public services, deinstitutionalisation, and cross-sectoral collaboration to promote innovative approaches. The ESF’s TO10 operations on education contribute to reach the education and training targets by supporting systemic change. This is highlighted by examples of operations that have led to **systemic changes in government policy approaches to education and training**, showing greater potential under 10i (early leavers from education and training) and 10iii (lifelong learning)<sup>60</sup>.

Finally, the **modelling of ESF impacts based on RHOMOLO simulations**<sup>61</sup> estimates that operations under the three thematic objectives generate positive macroeconomic impacts on the economy as a whole, on top of the direct results for participants in ESF operations<sup>62</sup>. For TO8, investment in employment and mobility up to 2018 would translate into the creation of 47 000 jobs in the long term and an increase in GDP of 0.06% compared to the baseline (2014). This would be due to final macroeconomic impacts generated **by human capital investments and the improvement on labour productivity**, as well as the structural changes involved. ESF support to social inclusion is expected to increase the EU GDP by 0.037% (which amounts to

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<sup>58</sup> A minority of stakeholders replied in the public consultation that the ESF support have not been effective at all in reducing early school leaving: 1% of managing authority respondents (1 of 104), 2% of beneficiary organisation respondents (5 of 227) and 5% of certifying, coordination and monitoring body respondents (2 of 38).

<sup>59</sup> See in TO10 supporting study the counterfactual positive results in both cases: contribution to reduce early school leavers in Galicia (Spain) operational programme and lifelong learning in West Wales and the Valleys operational programme (UK) – Traineeship programme.

<sup>60</sup> See section “5.5.5 Process effects including sustainability” for a more detailed discussion of systemic change.

<sup>61</sup> RHOMOLO is the Commission’s spatial computable general equilibrium model, developed by the Joint Research Centre. See for details: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/rhomolo>

<sup>62</sup> These results describe only the macroeconomic potential impacts of ESF as it has evolved up to 2018 and are subject to change as the programmes continue. Therefore, in order to ensure the robustness of results presented in this exercise, an accurate, systematic analysis with respect to the evolution of the ESF is required for future ex-post evaluation. The results included do not cover the indirect impacts that the programme has had throughout society (an analysis of these would probably be nearly impossible anyway, due to its complexity). However, it is clear that the positive effects of the ESF operations extend beyond what is known and can be quantified.

EUR 4 billion) by 2023 and create an additional 127 000 jobs, whereas **education and training operations** are expected to add 0.16% to GDP (EUR 18 billion of euro) by 2023 compared to the baseline, and create around 170 000 additional jobs. All increases are expected to be long-term (until 2033), as GDP and employment are expected to still be higher relative to the baseline. At the same time, labour supply, i.e. the number of individuals either working or looking for a job, should increase as well (moving from inactivity to activity), in particular as a result of ESF investments in employment and social inclusion (TO8 and TO9).

Moreover, at the regional level, **a considerable number of regions seem to benefit significantly** from ESF support, in particular less developed regions and those with less favourable conditions in terms of employment, social development and human capital and education. In some regions, these positive effects can be quite significant, given the size of the policy.

In the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic all results should be considered with due caution. The model assumes that there are no other adverse or positive shocks affecting the economy other than the ESF. However, COVID-19 is already having a very strong impact on observed GDP and employment rates. Poverty and inequality are likely to rise, with the elderly, women and young people with low skills likely to be affected the most. On the other hand, RHOMOLO estimations show however that **the expected post-COVID-19 macroeconomic outcomes would be worse in the absence of ESF support**<sup>63</sup>.

### 5.1.3 Effects on participants

There is evidence that ESF operations have a sustainable positive impact on participants. These impacts primarily relate to gains in terms of employment, education and qualifications, both in the immediate and longer-term (see **Table 7**). Although a wide range of 'soft' outcomes (such as soft skills or increased self-confidence) was also identified notably for social inclusion operations, these were recorded in only a few instances, as they are not part of the common indicators.

The figures in Table 7 should be interpreted with considerable caution as there is significant under reporting, as explained in chapter 3 - Implementation / State of play.

Evidence from the ESF implementation of employment related operations under TO8 (employment and labour mobility) and TO9 (social inclusion), is in line with meta-analyses of active labour market policies<sup>64</sup>, responses received from the public consultations, and in the case of TO8 (employment and mobility) of counterfactual evaluations conducted.

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<sup>63</sup> For the purpose of this exercise, note that Rhomolo simulation results focus more on the potential long-run impact of ESF support. The policy's impact is estimated based on investments that took place up to 2018, as is detailed in the econometric analysis enclosed with this staff working document.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Butschek, S. & Walter, T., 2014. What active labour market programmes work for immigrants in Europe? A meta-analysis of the evaluation literature. *IZA Journal of Migration* (2014) 3:48. doi 10.1186/s40176-014-0023-6; Card, D., Kluve, J., Weber, A., 2015. What Works? A meta-analysis of recent active labour market program evaluations. *IZA Discussion Paper No. 9236*; Kluve, J., 2006. The effectiveness of European active labour market policy. *IZA Discussion paper no. 2018*; Vooren et al, 2019. The effectiveness of active labour market policies: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Economic Surveys* (2019) Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 125–149. doi: 10.1111/joes.12269.

In general, in the short term, net employment effects seem to be positive for service/sanction type programmes (job counselling, guidance, orientation), whereas for traineeships and job incentives they were stronger in the medium- to long-term (from one to two year onwards). Public work typically showed lower net employment effects. The effects of vocational and educational training are positive as long as this training is personalised, adjusted to labour market needs and possibly coupled with work experience. This is made easier if training offered to employees is on very specific problems faced by companies and also addresses change management.

The effect of the different forms of support tend to also vary based on target group characteristics. For instance, job guidance and counselling can be very effective for low skilled people and migrants, both in the short- and medium- to long-term, but is less useful to graduates. Self-employment support seems to have also a positive effect especially for the low skilled. Work-based learning seems to generate homogeneous effects on the probability of employment across all skill groups in the medium- to long-term. Lighter forms of support such as job counselling can however be ineffective for those at a greater distance from the labour market, such as the people who are inactive, have been unemployed for more than two years or have multiple disadvantages. They also appear to show lower than average benefits for the high skilled.

There is evidence that T010 (education and training) operations have contributed to reducing ELET, supporting the achievement of school leaving qualifications, reducing the number of young people at risk of becoming NEET and helping young people to achieve qualifications that enable them to gain access to the labour market. Operations focusing on adults with low levels of qualifications target both those in employment and those who are unemployed or inactive. Case studies have highlighted successful examples of ESF operations providing second-chance education opportunities for adults with low levels of qualifications.

In the case of T09 (social inclusion) the success rate was used as a first indication of effectiveness. This is the ratio of recorded successes (as measured by result indicators) to the corresponding reference group (as measured by output indicators). The observed range is from zero to 29%. This relatively low rate can be explained by low reporting on results and the fact that common result indicators do not necessarily correspond to the desired results, (for instance employment outcomes for actions aimed at parents of school going children). Moreover, the bulk of the operations took place under investment priority 9i (active inclusion) hiding, a large variety of actions with labour market, education and training or service delivery aims. The estimated success rates are higher when calculated for the most relevant indicator for each type of operation (e.g. the success rate for employment focused actions is 89% for the result indicator referring to being in employment or self-employment). While the differences across investment priorities and types of actions are in line with expectations, any analysis of result indicators should be treated with great caution.

However, the success of ESF actions should not be analysed only in terms of employment, education and qualifications outcomes. Inputs to an EU level Delphi survey on thematic objective 9 (social inclusion) identified a number of areas including individual behaviour and social roles where ESF actions may have induce change. 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 (N=295) to the public consultation on TO9 agreed that participation in ESF supported actions generated soft-skills (57%) and increased self-confidence (54%). Such soft outcomes are particularly important to TO9 but not limited to it. A high proportion (41% out of 141 participants) of respondents to the public consultation on TO10 (education and training) also felt that their self-confidence increased as a result of participation. The evaluation of TO 8 (employment and mobility) notes that soft-outcomes are quite widespread but underreported.

#### 5.1.4 Factors hindering or promoting effectiveness

The various supporting studies identified a range of factors which affect the effectiveness of ESF operations as regards the delivery of support. There are broadly three groups of factors:

- (1) The environment in which the operations take place. This is made up of external factors that are not directly influenced by the entities involved in the delivery of these operations;
- (2) Factors internal to the management entities. They relate to institutional capacity, regulatory requirements, governance and partnerships;
- (3) The target groups themselves.

**A supportive environment is crucial.** This refers both to how the operations fit into a wider national or regional context and to how they are perceived by the local communities in which they take place. It is particularly important for TO9 (social inclusion) and TO10 (education and training) operations. Shared management entails that the actual day-to-day management of operational programmes is entrusted to national (or regional) bodies. Operational programme strategies should be integrated and embedded into national (or regional) strategies if they are to be implemented successfully. Performance improves when there is a strong strategic approach that informs the prioritisation and targeting of resources to address specific needs. On the other hand, there are several documented cases where the lack of local support or buy-in has slowed down the implementation of TO9 (social inclusion) measures. For instance, a housing programme in Italy was challenged when owners remained reluctant to rent their property to vulnerable groups (homeless people and members of the LGBT community) even with a guarantee of payment. Such examples show that there might be a need to envisage actions that build support for the proposed operations.

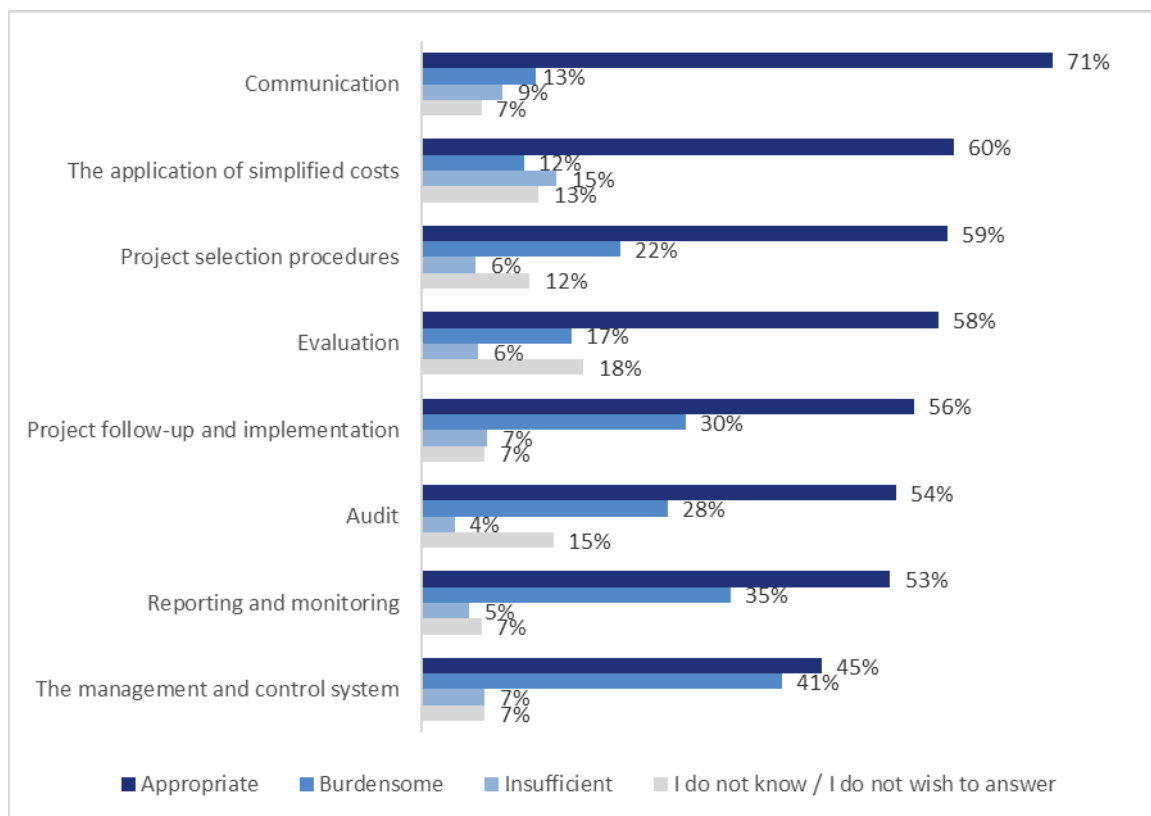
The various supporting studies have also shown that **institutional capacity**, at all levels of implementation, and **regulatory requirements**, are linked and cross-cutting factors influencing effectiveness. Managing authorities have to lead strong coordination processes involving local and regional authorities and key partners such as NGOs, civil society organisations and social partners. In turn, beneficiaries must have the capacity to deliver ESF operations at the scale required. They may need to rely on the managing authorities to build the capacity of their staff on how to access, implement and monitor the funds. Regulatory issues include those related to the setting up and operation of the monitoring systems, the definition of simplified cost options, duplications of controls and compliance with state aid regulations. Responses to the public consultation tend to confirm that these regulatory issues can place an important burden on beneficiaries and managing authorities in the implementation of ESF supported actions.



For example, respondents to the TO8 public consultation on employment and labour mobility were asked about factors that may hinder the implementation of actions. Approximately three quarters of them (76% of 238) agreed that the **administrative burden on beneficiaries and managing authorities** hampers progress. In addition, external factors, such as **structural problems** (i.e. lack of employment opportunities and low education and skills level) also play an important role in respondents' views (for 71.3% of 238 respondents). Some organisations specified the obstacles types they had encountered in a related open question. Out of 80 responses, 33 indicated cumbersome bureaucracy and lengthy procedures as the most important factors hampering the effectiveness of ESF procedures, which is aligned with the responses given to the closed question.

The public consultation for TO9 (social inclusion) asked the organisations involved in the management and delivery of ESF support to qualify the administrative arrangements for implementing operations. The results suggest that the most effective administrative arrangement of all is communication, with 71% of respondents rating it as appropriate. Opinions on the management and control system were, however, mixed, with 45% of respondents believing that it is effective and 41% considering it burdensome.

**Figure 11. How would you qualify the following administrative arrangements for the implementation of operations?**



N= 295 Source: TO9 supporting study report annex 7 -

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

**Partnerships between managing authorities, beneficiary organisations and other actors improve effectiveness.** A high level of cooperation is especially important in the delivery of personalised operations or integrated support. This success factor was highlighted in the public

consultations as well as the country-based analyses of several Member States across all supporting studies. Local actors, civil society organisations and NGOs, often play a crucial role in engaging with harder to reach target groups.

The correct **alignment of operations with the needs of the target group** is also a success factor. An econometric analysis of TO8 (employment and mobility) data showed that the socio-economic context and distance of the target groups from the labour market might affect the 'gross' results of the operations with an employment objective. Combined with a focus on targets or results, this may lead to 'creaming'. This finding also applies to TO9 and TO10 operations. However, it is the form and suitability of the support offered to participants that determines its net effects, irrespective of where it is implemented and for whom. The overshooting of targets and high success rates across all ESF operations indicates that creaming does indeed occur.

The precise identification of a target group makes it easier to take into account the additional efforts required to reach it, as opposed to those people for whom a result can be generated more easily. The econometric analysis of monitoring data for TO8 (employment and mobility) suggests that operations targeting needs that are comparatively widespread and constant among the population tend to proceed at a faster pace, especially where there are no obstacles to participation such as disabilities or multiple disadvantages.

Similarly, the evaluation of ESF support to TO10 showed that all Member States identified target **groups** at the design stage of operations. This is largely thanks to the programming process of the European Structural and Investment Funds, which ensured that **needs assessments** were conducted by all Member States in the partnership agreement and reflected in the operational programmes.

At a general level, 143 of the 145 operational programmes that planned for ESF TO9 operations were found to be consistent with the country specific recommendations (CSRs). The CSRs from 2014 to 2019 were reviewed more closely to identify relevant recommendations for ESF support to social inclusion.

In their replies to the public consultation, beneficiary organisations and managing authorities also underlined the importance of knowing and understanding the specific circumstances and needs of the target group to successfully deliver ESF support. However, the precise alignment of operations to the needs of the target group does not need to take place in the operational programme itself. The broad definition of the target group in some operational programmes has allowed for flexibility in implementation, for instance in reacting to the refugee crisis (e.g. Belgium, Austria).

## 5.2 Efficiency

### 5.2.1 Assessment of efficiency

At this stage of implementation, efficiency can only be assessed based on the cost per participation. Cost per result would be a more appropriate measure, but it cannot be used yet because of delayed and non-simultaneous reporting on results and costs.

**Table 8. Cost per participation**

Cost per participation (in EUR)	TO8 Employment and mobility	TO9 Social inclusion	TO10 education and training
average	1,309	1,441	1,137
Range across investment priority	142 - 1,935	581 – 3,048	729 - 2,754
Range across Member States	440 - 8,129	326 – 7,493	343 – 6,791
2007 – 2013 Ex-post update*	1,215	1,685	739

\*The 2007-2013 estimate was calculated ex post at the end of the period. The current estimates for 2014-2020 are based on end-of-2018 data and are affected by delays in reporting.

The cost per participation is the ratio of declared expenditure to the reported number of participations. The observed cost per participation (see Table 8) varies widely, reflecting the variety of operation types implemented, the different needs of target groups and the range of contexts in which operations are implemented. The estimates for TO8 (employment and mobility) and TO9 (social inclusion) are roughly in line with the unit costs reported in the supporting study the update of data reported in the 2007-2013 ESF ex-post evaluation<sup>65</sup>. The estimate for TO10 (education and training) is 50% more. This is essentially thought to reflect: (i) a bigger emphasis on more costly operations, indicating a wider use of individual grants, and (ii) high quality and longer schemes supporting higher education and training. Moreover, in 2007-2013, the reporting of indirect participants was more widespread (e.g. where a school or curriculum was directly targeted, the number of pupils was also reported).

Overall cost-benefit analyses carried out for TO9 (social inclusion)<sup>66</sup> and TO10 (education and training)<sup>67</sup> suggest positive returns particularly under 9i (active inclusion), and significant private and public returns for 10i (early leavers from education and training) and 10ii (tertiary education). However a note of caution should be attached to the results as a number of broad assumptions needed to be applied, given the limitations of the monitoring data and the limited impact evidence. A detailed cost benefit analysis identified positive returns for four out of five projects investigated under TO 9 (social inclusion). The net benefits of TO9 are even higher if all outcomes, in particular including 'soft outcomes' are considered.

### 5.2.2 Factors hindering or promoting efficiency

As regards TO8 operations, actual and perceived administrative burden has hampered effective implementation, through delays, and has also impacted cost-effectiveness. New monitoring systems and databases were developed at Member State level to comply with regulatory changes since the 2007-2013 programming period. The most significant factor is insufficient **administrative capacity**, which in turn affects implementation. Furthermore, additional costs

<sup>65</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8330&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>66</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>67</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

have been incurred for recruiting and delivering ESF to **harder-to-reach groups**, especially those in remote/rural areas.

As regards TO9, there were mixed views on whether the application of simplified cost options reduced administrative burden or not. The implementation of mono-fund operational programmes appeared to be more efficient than multi-fund operational programmes. **Gold plating** was identified in 13 Member States<sup>68</sup>.

TO10 operations, gold plating was also frequently highlighted by national stakeholders as creating additional administrative barriers for ESF project managers and potential beneficiaries. The particular challenges in managing ESF TO10 operations highlighted in the case studies included the following:

- high number of stakeholders in implementing ESF operations which requires a strong coordination capacity to ensure efficient delivery;
- lack of cooperation between national governmental ministries in the delivery of operations under the same investment priority;
- insufficient communication and information exchange between project managers in the implementing organisations.
- lack of mutual coordination in aligning individual education policy actions;
- lack of consistency in implementing operations (for example in cases some activities are carried out in parallel and should take place in successive stages).

Overall, most organisations that responded to the TO10 public consultation and most stakeholders believe that, on the whole, the ESF administrative and regulatory requirements are proportionate to the benefits achieved; most managing authorities and intermediary bodies that responded (62.3%, i.e. 65 out of 104) judged the listed arrangements to be appropriate. However, on average, more than 20% (23 out of 104) of respondents rated the arrangements to be burdensome, while around 8% (8 of 104) judged them as insufficient. Most respondents from beneficiary organisations (59.5%, i.e. 135 out of 227) judged the listed arrangements as appropriate. However, more than 22% (50 out of 227) of beneficiary organisations rated them to be burdensome, while 6% (13 out of 227) perceived them as insufficient. Moreover, interviewed stakeholders from countries with smaller ESF allocations felt that the requirements would be too onerous. The evaluation research suggests that administrative requirements can discourage smaller beneficiaries such as NGOs, which are crucial for reaching vulnerable groups, from accessing ESF funds.

### 5.2.3 Visibility of ESF interventions

Regarding the visibility of ESF operations, there is **room for improvement**. In particular, evidence of the visibility of TO8 operations remains thin, even if there are several good examples of effective communication. Out of 541 respondents to the TO8 public consultation, 70.4% seem to consider **social media campaigns** as the best channel of information, followed at a distance by information and awareness raising events (44.5%). The least popular channel seem to be the distribution of flyers and placement of advertisements in newspapers.

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<sup>68</sup> Gold-plating describes additional rules and regulatory obligations that go beyond the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) requirements set out at EU level, and that make the implementation of ESIF more costly and burdensome for programme bodies and beneficiaries.

Interestingly, the channels of information actually encountered by surveyed ESF participants are slightly different: most respondents say that they learned about the support measures they benefited from through employment services and employment information centres (43.4%), and less than a fifth through social media.

, a significant proportion of stakeholders and potential participants were not aware of or familiar with the ESF at all. Although many Member States invested in raising awareness of the ESF among beneficiaries, target groups and the general population, the level of awareness remains mixed. The picture is somewhat better for TO10, where there was positive evidence of the visibility of ESF funded operations: responses to the public consultation suggested a good level of the ESF's visibility among organisations without a direct role in managing and delivering ESF programmes (only 12.9%, i.e 8 out of 62- organisations reported never hearing of the ESF before the survey). Programme managers were familiar with the programme's visibility rules and claimed to be applying them. Beneficiaries are aware of visibility rules as this is part of their contractual obligations and intermediary organisations have played an important role as multipliers in maximising the visibility of TO10 operations among beneficiary organisations<sup>69</sup>.

## 5.3 Relevance

### 5.3.1 Alignment with needs

This evaluation criterion examines the extent to which ESF operations were relevant for addressing policy needs and the needs of target groups requiring support, at the programming and implementation levels. Overall, evidence from the three supporting studies shows that there is a **high degree of alignment of planned ESF operations under the three thematic objectives with employment, social inclusion and education and training needs**. The evidence also shows that ESF operations have in general been **relevant for the needs of target groups** though 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.

*A) At the planning stage*, evidence shows that the most important needs of the main target groups of each ESF thematic objective were taken on board to a great extent. This is largely part thanks to the programming process of the European Structural and Investment Funds which ensured that needs assessments were conducted by all Member States in the partnership agreement and reflected in the operational programmes. The broad scope in the design of the investment priorities, covering a wide range of policy, areas also contributed to ensuring relevance at the strategic level.

For instance, the evaluation findings show that TO8 operations on employment and labour mobility, contributed to helping unemployed people join the labour market. In response to the high level of unemployment across the EU at the start of the programming period most attention was given to (immediate) employment measures, such as providing individual guidance to job seekers, integrated approaches, hiring incentives for employers, and supporting apprenticeship models. Less attention was dedicated to more structural employment measures,

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<sup>69</sup> As detailed in the TO10 supporting study. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

such as gender equality, active ageing or labour market institutions. Moreover, analysis of regional allocation of expenditure suggests that TO8 funding was typically directed to where it was most needed. This means that regions with the highest unemployment rates received not only the bulk of funding but also the largest share of expenditure with respect to their GDP.

**Box 1. Identifying the target group needs for social inclusion operations**

**Social inclusion** (TO9) operations were highly relevant given that target groups were typically identified at the planning stage, through **needs assessments and existing evaluations and consultative processes**, which promoted buy-in and helped ensure that objectives were realistic and adapted to the socio-economic context.

For instance in Austria, target groups were identified through consultations between the Managing Authority, the intermediate bodies at the federal and regional level, the social partners, NGOs, and other stakeholders. In Lithuania, the specific needs of the ageing population were reviewed during the planning stage through workshops with local stakeholders; TO9 actions were tailored accordingly. Delphi survey respondents also underscored the importance of identifying the target groups in the early stages of the project to promote relevance.

As regards **education and training**, all Member States identified the target groups at the design stage of operations. The design of investment priorities covered a wide range of education and training objectives and types of intervention across all education levels throughout the life-cycle, allowing Member States to tackle diverse education and training needs in different Member States or regions. This **programming flexibility** has been widely praised by national and EU stakeholders alike for increasing the relevance of planned operations to the needs of target groups.

*B) During the implementation stage*, ESF operations succeeded in reaching the most important target groups of each thematic objective and addressed their needs. This was demonstrated by participation indicators and confirmed by stakeholder views and other evaluation evidence, although some challenges were identified for specific target groups.

The objectives and operations funded by **ESF support to employment and labour mobility** (TO8) were mostly aligned with the needs of the target groups addressed. Participation figures confirm the dominance of operations targeting the unemployed. Until December 2018, the number of participations of unemployed people across all programmes amounted to some 4.6 million compared to 0.5 million of inactive persons, and 1.7 million of employed people. According to organisations that responded to the public consultation, job-seekers, inactive people and the long-term unemployed were the most successfully supported groups. In-depth analysis of operational programmes and country case studies provide evidence that Member States have developed operations that are relevant to the needs of the unemployed, entrepreneurs, women, employees, older workers and labour market institutions.

As regards **social inclusion**, most of the participations recorded under TO9 involved people who were unemployed (53%) and had a low education level - primary or lower secondary - (54%). A large proportion of participations were from people with a foreign background or from minority groups including Roma (28%) and people with a disability (16%). The reported proportion of people living in rural areas (16%) is far below the almost one third of the EU28 population living

in rural areas - see Table 5 and Figure 8. Several social inclusion operational programmes carried out gender-based targeting, (e.g. women not engaged in the labour market were targeted in Ireland, lone immigrant women were targeted in Finland and Roma women were targeted in Spain). Moreover, TO9 funds were mostly allocated to less economically favourable regions, thus addressing those geographic areas in which most people in need are living; about 68% of recorded participations were in less economically favourable regions.

**Education and training** operations succeeded in reaching and addressing the needs of their target groups, particularly of **young people**, a key target group for TO10: approximately 6.26 million participations were by people under 25 years old (66% of the total TO10 participations)<sup>70</sup>. Young people were the main focus of operations under investments priorities 10i (early leavers from education and training and access to learning pathways) and 10ii (tertiary education). Evidence shows that ESF TO10 operations made good progress in addressing the needs of young people<sup>71</sup>. This contributes to reducing the share of early leavers from education and training, supporting the achievement of school qualifications, reducing the number of young people at risk of becoming NEET and helping young people to get qualifications that enable them to gain access to the labour market.

***Box 2. Ensuring the relevance of early leavers from education and training operations through risk assessment***

Planning risk assessments at the start of operations that target disadvantaged student groups, has allowed for more tailored support that directly addresses people's needs. For example, in Latvia, a risk assessment methodology was developed as part of the programme supporting students at risk of early school leaving in Latvia. This made it possible to identify people's specific needs and their circumstances from the start, which is important as these vary even within the same target group. Some at-risk students, in particular those with learning difficulties, needed extra classes, while others, such as those from low-income families, needed transport and accommodation compensation instead. The risk assessment ensured that the programme to be tailored to these specific needs, increasing its relevance.

*C) However* the evidence shows that **ESF operations did not always fully succeed on reaching and addressing the needs of some specific target groups, particularly the most disadvantaged ones**. This is discussed in more details below

**TO8 employment operations have managed to reach participants in high need of support**, including inactive people, the long-term unemployed and migrants. Despite some reported issues with eligibility criteria including as a result of gold-plating (e.g. for migrants) one in eight participant has a migrant or minority background. Over one in four participations registered comes from a rural background. This is less than the proportion of the rural population in the EU28 but there is considerable evidence of underreporting in this area. However, there are still some challenges to address, as disadvantaged groups are particularly targeted in more developed regions, and in regions in which labour market conditions are improving and which

<sup>70</sup> People in employment and unemployment account for a relatively small proportion of the overall number of participations under ESF TO10 (most participants are classified as inactive).

<sup>71</sup> As highlighted in the effectiveness section

have progressively increased their focus on individuals at a greater distance from the labour market. **Less developed areas seldom report positive results for disadvantaged.** Organisations that responded to the public consultation seem to moderately agree on the ESF's ability to support migrants (49.2%) and individuals with a foreign background or people in remote areas (48.9%) and highly disagree about TO8 ESF support to people affected by **poverty** (39.1%) and **homeless people** (17.4%). Moreover, operations have been **less effective in addressing the needs of older workers** (participants aged over 54) and **gender equality**, with limited focus on measures for active ageing and those that address strongly embedded gender gaps.

**Compared with ESF support under TO8 and TO10, support for social inclusion (TO9)** reached a substantially higher proportion of people with a disability, migrants, people with a foreign background and minorities, as well as people with low education<sup>72</sup> - see Table 5. However, **evidence on whether ESF support for social inclusion reached the most vulnerable populations with the greatest needs is mixed.** In the replies to the public consultation, 39% of respondents considered that the target groups that should be prioritised were in effect being reached while 35% believed the opposite. Respondents to the EU-level Delphi survey noted that reaching target groups outside the reach of social services, employment services, health care and education is a key challenge. Among other factors (see below), 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.

**Education and training operations have faced the biggest challenges in reaching disadvantaged groups, registering lower participation rates for disadvantaged people compared with other ESF operations (TO8 and TO9):** Overall, the proportion of disadvantaged participants in TO10 is 21%, below the proportion of disadvantaged participants in all ESF operations (31%). Multiple stakeholders at the EU and national level identified refugees and migrants, Roma, the long-term unemployed, older workers and people with disabilities as the most challenging groups to engage across all investment priorities. The responses to the public consultation (see Annex 2) provide evidence of TO10's overall success in supporting specific target groups but confirm that Roma and other minorities were often not seen to be successfully supported through the ESF.

Moreover, improving access to higher education for vulnerable groups is a big challenge. Disadvantaged groups have been hard to reach for ESF TO10 tertiary sector operations (10ii) because of difficulties in developing collaborative relationships between the tertiary sector and schools, hampering the identification of suitable groups that would widen the diversity of the student body. **Reaching and engaging NEETs** is another challenge for ESF operations supporting education, as institutions have limited resources to implement outreach activities. There are some notable exceptions, as some operational programmes highlight NEETs as a priority target group, e.g. West Wales and Valleys in the United Kingdom, where TO10 operations aim to

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<sup>72</sup> However, ESF support for social inclusion reached a lower proportion of people in rural areas than TO8 and TO10.



reduce the number of pupils at risk of becoming NEET, and the Portuguese national operational programme. In fact, identifying marginalised young people was often seen as less of a challenge than getting them to take part in operations.

Particular **reasons why reaching disadvantaged groups is a challenge vary by country, investment priority and type of operation**. Common challenges include:

- 1) *eligibility criteria* set for participation (e.g. in certain countries individuals must be registered as unemployed before being eligible for ESF operations, making operations inaccessible to the inactive; a similar obstacle was mentioned in relation to Roma individuals, who may not have identity papers);
- 2) *administrative requirements* for beneficiaries discourage smaller NGOs with stronger links to harder-to-reach groups;
- 3) *a need for more integrated and follow-up actions*;
- 4) *additional funding* required to target hard-to-reach groups;
- 5) higher risk of targeting operations to vulnerable groups in terms of achievement of targets (leading to 'creaming', as explained above).

### 5.3.2 Observed factors that improve relevance

**Individual-centred approaches based on specific target groups needs** were considered especially relevant for all thematic objectives. For instance, for TO8, a German operation in the federal operational programme, focused on difficult-to-reach target groups and, offered counselling - under the heading of gender equality measures - based on a tailor-made package of measures. Similarly, in Finland, personal guidance and a needs assessment were the starting points, which ensured that actions met local beneficiary needs. For TO10, the education stakeholders interviewed felt that interventions focusing on NEETs require more integrated operations and follow-up activities to improve their effectiveness and sustainability.

**Adequate and effective involvement of a wide spectrum of key partners throughout ESF programming and implementation** is key to aligning operations with the specific needs of target groups and local context, improve buy-in and ensure that the objectives are realistic.

Whilst the **partnership principle**<sup>73</sup> was thoroughly implemented in all Member States at planning level on paper (i.e. in the drafting of the partnership agreements and operational programmes), most stakeholders consulted expressed concerns about the **insufficient involvement and diversification of stakeholders**. For instance, in education ESF operations, public authorities (national and regional levels), are generally overrepresented at the expense of education and training institutions, local authorities, civil society and social and economic

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<sup>73</sup> Article 5 of the Common Provision Regulation (CPR) requires Member State to organise for each ESIF fund programme a partnership with the competent regional, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders, at all programming and implementation stages and at all levels, in line with its institutional and legal framework.

partners<sup>74</sup>. Case studies in ESF support to employment showed that the cooperation between new partners at regional level made it possible to develop innovative ideas in response to specific topics and changing needs. For social inclusion operations, overall, the different partners were highly involved in the programming phase and to some extent during implementation; for multi-fund operational programmes, however, the implementation of the partnerships and mobilisation of partners was identified as a challenge, possibly due to the programme's complexity. Delphi survey respondents also underlined the **importance of identifying the target groups in the early stages of a project** to improve relevance. Finally, the **capacity of key ESF stakeholders** needs to be increased, to allow them to better contribute to the design, implementation and monitoring of ESF operations and thus improve relevance to target group needs.

The use of an **integrated approach, combining several operations at the same time (depending on needs)** is particularly relevant for operations related employment, social inclusion and early leavers from education and training.

### ***Box 3. Integrated approaches for ensuring relevance of support to employment***

In most support to employment operations, particularly in investment priority 8i, different activities for individuals are combined in an integrated way (guidance, training, accreditation of prior learning, job searching and matching etc.). This ensures that the ESF does not support isolated operations, but those that feed into an individual, tailor-made plan for participants. In some cases, the supply side (increasing the qualifications and skills of job seekers) and demand side (incentives to hire job seekers or provide work experience places) measures are combined. The supporting studies provide many examples:

- In the employment-related operations of the Campania operational programme in **Italy**, needs were addressed by pursuing different types of measures related to recipients' profiles and characteristics (pathways combining guidance, counselling, upskilling and reskilling training and, company incentives for the long term unemployed).
- In **Germany**, the national operational programme combined operations targeted at SMEs, individuals and intermediaries (social partners), and strengthened regional structures.
- In **France**, operations integrated several areas to remove obstacles hindering integration in the labour market (acquiring relevant skills, guidance for elaborating a career plan, etc.).

Integrated approaches are particularly key to addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups; in social exclusion operations, actions were tailored to target groups by taking a holistic approach and adapting to their multiple needs. For example in the Italian National operational programme on social inclusion, actions to tackle extreme social exclusion amongst adults sought to address the needs of people experiencing housing exclusion. However, this integrated approach was missing from some operations, for example in the Romanian human capital operational programme, and Italy's Puglia operational programme, where the operation was weakened because of a too narrow focus on training.

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<sup>74</sup> Non-public partners such as training institutions/vocational schools, employers and entrepreneurs, NGOs, civil society appear to not have been appropriately consulted, and when they were consulted, it was not in a timely manner, prohibiting meaningful contribution.

### 5.3.3 Flexibility in a changing context

As regarding TO8 operations, the operational programmes have proved to be flexible enough to allow changes throughout the programming period, which ensured that they were able to respond to changing needs.

For most programmes, objectives, operations types and intended target groups were defined relatively broadly in. This provided the flexibility to respond to changes in the implementation context without additional procedures. Formal amendments of operational programmes for formal changes in allocated budgets and revisions to indicators, were also common. These adjustments were tracked and show different patterns across regions, in line with the changing situation of employment and labour mobility (see Box 4).

The case studies gives ample evidence of how programmes were able to flexibly respond to changing socio-economic contexts.

#### **Box 4. Examples of flexibility**

- In the German national operational programme, for instance, the increasing importance of digital skills for employment received additional attention in the last calls for proposals, within the broader programmed framework of skills for employment. This involved a slight modification of calls for proposals, which continued to fit within the broader framework set by the operational programme.
- Another example is Denmark, where the improved economic situation reduced the possibilities for firms to allow staff to participate in long-term skill upgrading that was initially planned. With lower demand for long term operations than expected, additional operations were set up to support briefer training sessions focusing on more specialised skills.
- In Spain, particularly in regions where the unemployment rate improved substantially, existing employment operations were reformulated to benefit not only the unemployed, but also people with a precarious or temporary job situation.
- In response to the rapidly improving youth employment rates since 2014, Czechia was able to re-balance its operational programmes to focus more specifically on older unemployed workers, whose unemployment rates were not improving at the same rate.

Managing authorities considered that TO9 operations allowed for sufficient flexibility to adapt to changes in context, including the migration crisis that started around 2015. Changes in the operation types that were implemented compared with what had been planned occurred in at least 10 Member States. Shifts in target groups reached by TO9 operations were identified in 13 Member States.

Most Member States already identified priority target groups at the planning stage, but others started with a less precise target group definition, which was further focused and disaggregated during implementation. This flexibility may have helped TO9 operations to reach more target groups than originally planned.

Similarly, operations planned under TO10 remained relevant throughout the programming period, despite changes in the socio-economic context. Evidence shows that where changes were needed to ensure continued relevance - for example when national/regional needs and/or political priorities changed, operational programmes were able to adequately adapt. Notable

examples of operational programmes that were successfully reprogrammed to respond to emerging needs and adapt to new realities:

- In **Ireland**, it became harder to engage unemployed people in training programmes due to the declining unemployment rate. The operational programme was adapted to address this, ESF funds for training for the unemployed (10ii) were reallocated to operations to promote adult literacy under 10iii.
- In **Portugal**, the human capital operational programme was reprogrammed in 2018 to allocate more funding for operations targeting low-skilled adults, which had been less of a priority in initial programming given the strong focus on measures for the unemployed at the start of the period.

There were very few examples of the ESF being unable to adapt to a significantly altered implementation or political context. One such example comes from the United Kingdom, where the adult participation rate in lifelong learning fell slowly but consistently between 2013 and 2018 with the 2018 rate higher than the EU average, yet ESF TO10 actions were not adjusted to address this.

#### ***Box 5. Preliminary reflections on the ESF's possible role in addressing COVID 19 crisis***

When the **COVID-19 pandemic** started, the field work for the supporting studies was completed or about to be completed. The time frame covered, 2014-2018, excludes the pandemic and the subsequent crisis. Nevertheless, a number of lessons learned show that ESF operations are **still highly relevant in the new COVID-19 context**.

As in any crisis, Europe's more vulnerable groups suffer disproportionately. This is because they are less well connected to internet, their jobs tend not to lend themselves to tele-working, online learning is not accessible to their children, etc.

Vulnerable groups have complex needs and very often the hardest to reach. Strong cooperation and coordination is therefore especially important when deciding, designing and delivering targeted operations or support that are known to be more efficient in addressing these needs. This, in turn, requires **high levels of inclusive stakeholder involvement and partnerships**.

Unemployment levels are already rising as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is only likely to worsen as the economic impact of the crisis unfolds. Changes to the economy may prove to be long terms. In this context, **lifelong learning and training** will be crucial in preparing people to re-enter the labour market and adapt to new working arrangements and the economy's changing. Issues related to the provision of guidance and counselling also plays an important role.

## **5.4 Coherence**

### **5.4.1 ESF Internal coherence**

ESF operations show high levels of complementarity and coherence with each other across different investment priorities, both within thematic objective and across the different thematic objectives 8, 9 and 10.

#### 5.4.1.1 *Internal coherence within thematic objectives*

**ESF support to employment operations is complementary and coherent across investment priorities, with operations either indirectly or directly contributing to one another's objectives of and/or complementing each other.** The definition of the scope of each investment priority maximises complementarity and synergy among all actions contributing towards the general objective of improving employment. At the same time, some flexibility is allowed as regard the operations that can be funded. For instance, there is complementarity between investment priority 8iv for activities that promote equality between men and women in all areas and investment priority 8i on access to employment.

**However, there is room to improvement coherence to avoid overlap and maximise synergies, particularly: a) when operations cover horizontal themes such as social innovation, and b) when national and regional operational programmes operate on the same territories.** As regards point a), given the relatively flexible boundaries demarcating TO8 investment priorities, it is possible for operations funded under different programmes and strands to focus on the same objectives and target groups (e.g. social innovation operations, the analysis of Germany's operations and Spain' show). These operations are cross-sectoral by their very nature and thus an additional effort is required to fine-tune them so that they meet the needs and objectives of thematic support. As regards point b) overlap can happen when national and regional operational programmes contribute to similar objectives, such as in the case of Italy, France and Spain. For instance, in Italy, although the scope of the national operational programme is more systemic, similar operations are being implemented at national and regional level, for example to support the public employment services or provide employment incentives.

**As regards social inclusion, by addressing the multiple drivers of social exclusion and discrimination, ESF operations complement each other in helping vulnerable groups towards social inclusion.** ESF support takes holistic approach by combining different intervention types. Operation types 1-4 focus on groups of individuals facing social exclusion and discrimination. Types 5 and 6 focus on the demand side (e.g. the capacity of organisations to adequately support socially excluded populations). In sum, about two thirds of operational programmes working on social inclusion combine both operation types, targeting both individuals and entities<sup>75</sup>. For example, in Sweden, ESF support to social inclusion included operation types 1, 4 and 6. In Spain (under the Madrid operational programme), ESF support to social inclusion included operations types 1, 4, 5 and 6).

**Overall, coherence is very strong between investment priorities within ESF operations focussing on education and training (TO10), as well as between national and regional operational programmes.** Most consulted stakeholders and case study research emphasised the fact that the sectoral focus of the different investment priorities helped ensure clarity of scope and coherence between the different levels and types of education and training: pre-school and school education (10i), higher education (10ii), lifelong learning (10iii) and vocational education and training (10iv). There is **some slight blurring of the distinction between 10iii (lifelong learning) and 10iv (labour market relevance) in different Member States, however.** In particular, VET-focused priorities and operations could be found under both, especially for

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<sup>75</sup> 66% of planned funds, 67% of allocated funds and 67% of declared expenditures.

relation to adult learners and workers. However, specific operational programmes generally used a clear intervention logic for each (this varied according to the needs of the Member State or region), and there is no evidence of overlaps. Still, **challenges related to ensuring coherence were occasionally raised, in particular in terms of potential duplications between national and regional operational programmes. One example is Portugal, where joint work was required to avoid overlaps between the national programme for success at school<sup>76</sup> and the local action plans to tackle school failure<sup>77</sup> which are supported under regional operational programmes.**

#### *5.4.1.2 Coherence across thematic objectives*

**Overall, internal coherence between operations funded across different ESF thematic objectives (TOs 8, 9 and 10) is good**, with many examples of coherence and complementarity between operations. There have been no **overlaps in practice**. However, there were some challenges related to implementation (e.g. cases of over-separation of management responsibilities and weak inter-sectoral cooperation) which may have limited the synergies between operations under different thematic objectives in certain Member States. **Key factors contributing to internal coherence** (confirmed in the Policy Delphi validation) included: (i) rigorous planning at programming stage, (ii) ensuring alignment with CSRs and national strategies and (iii) good coordination and communication between authorities managing different TOs/investment priorities/operational programmes.

At the planning stage there is **high potential for overlaps between TO9 and the other two TOs**, given that there are strong similarities between most types of social inclusion operations and with operations under other TOs. Indeed, some actions that could have been programmed under other TOs may have been programmed under TO9 to meet the requirement that Member States allocate at least 20% of ESF funds to TO9. The potential for overlap is particularly high between some types of TO9 and TO8 operations. For example, Type 1 (employed-focused actions) and Type 2 (enhance basic skills) have potential overlaps with TO8 - Employment Objective<sup>78</sup>. The overlap with TO10 was small, mainly because of the limited presence of Type 3 (basic school education) operations under social inclusion.

Although they often have a similar employment goal, **operations supporting social inclusion focus on the more disadvantaged groups and take a more holistic approach than other thematic objectives, which helps avoid potential overlaps**. Social inclusion operations often focused on the most vulnerable groups and people who were furthest from the labour market, which ensured that they were different - as well as complementary - to TO8 and TO10 operations, which covered a much broader target group. There are several examples where TO9 operations were distinguishable from TO8 operations, primarily regarding Type 1 and 2 operations. In Spain, the Acceder project provided services tailored to a specific group in a vulnerable situation (which would not be provided by regular public employment services). In Italy participants in TO9 operations were recruited from social services or mental health

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<sup>76</sup> PNPSE - Programa nacional de promoção do sucesso escolar.

<sup>77</sup> PiiCiE - Plano integrado e inovador de combate ao insucesso escolar.

<sup>78</sup> More than half of expenditures declared by beneficiaries to managing authorities (55%) and recorded participations (55%) for TO9 had potential overlaps with TO8 – Employment objective.

services, while participants in operations under TO8 and TO10 were recruited through public employment services or training providers.

Overall, there has been **a good degree of coherence across ESF thematic objective operations, as well between TO10 and TO8, particularly in relation to youth employment and vocational training** For example, several operations relating to training for young people also refer to YEI<sup>79</sup> or TO8 funding: (i) the Irish national evaluation of TO10<sup>80</sup> underlines the coherence with YEI; (ii) in the regional operational programme for Lombardy, the ESF contribution to vocational education in TO10 is coherent with TO8; (iii) a Slovenian case study also identifies complementarity with TO8.

Some consulted stakeholders did, however, suggest that **coherence could be improved, by involving stakeholders more in design and implementation phases.** Issues were raised in this area due to difficulties in relationships with stakeholders involved in implementation. Some targeted consultations also underlined that, synergies between the different TOs were sometimes limited, as the actors involved in TO8 and TO10 came from 'different worlds'. Finally, evidence from case studies highlights a number of some challenges for ensuring coherence, for example in Romania, where despite good coherence between thematic objectives on paper, a lack of inter-sectoral cooperation and multi-sectoral policy programming meant that tackling the phenomenon of early school leaving, or adapting education systems to the needs of the labour market, are not addressed in a sufficiently coherent way.

## 5.4.2 ESF external coherence

### 5.4.2.1 *Coherence with EU policies*

Overall, ESF operations are **well aligned with EU policies** in the fields of employment, social inclusion and education and training. Moreover, evidence gathered during the evaluation shows that there is strong alignment **and a generally high level of coherence between ESF operations and the priorities, analyses and country-specific recommendations (CSRs)<sup>81</sup> of the European Semester<sup>82</sup>.**

ESF support to employment operations are **fully aligned with EU employment policy and objectives**, as set in the EU2020 strategy and in the European Semester. In general, the country specific recommendations are addressed by the ESF TO8 investments (see point 5.4.4 below).

In all Member States, **ESF support to social inclusion was aligned with the European policy framework on social inclusion<sup>83</sup>**, at both the design and the planning stage, **and remained so**

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<sup>79</sup> Youth Employment Initiative

<sup>80</sup> POBAL (2017), Kickboxing, Kindness and Going the Extra Mile.

<sup>81</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/eu-country-specific-recommendations\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/eu-country-specific-recommendations_en)

<sup>82</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en)

<sup>83</sup> The European policy framework on social protection and social inclusion encompasses a range of policies that are specific to and cut across sectors and target groups.

**after reprogramming and OP modifications.** The EU 2020 strategy<sup>84</sup> and the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>85</sup>, introduced in 2017, were policies the most often cited in planning documents – the former was cited in the planning documents in 16 Member States<sup>86</sup> while the latter was cited in the planning documents in seven Member States<sup>87</sup>. Planning documents were updated during the programming period to reflect the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017. The social investment package (SIP)<sup>88</sup> was only referenced in the planning documents for TO9 operations in Romania<sup>89</sup>. Few references to EU policies for specific target groups (e.g. Roma and persons with a disability) were made, although in practice these target groups were frequently addressed by social inclusion operations. The EU framework for national Roma integration strategies was cited by three countries (Bulgaria, Germany, and Romania), the European disability strategy 2010-2020 was only cited by Lithuania. In contrast, the review of annual implementation reports found that operations in 22 Member States aimed to help specifically Roma people and other minorities and operations in 25 Member States aimed to help people with disabilities. Respondents to the EU-level Delphi survey also highlighted the value of considering the bigger picture and linking social inclusion to innovation - environment and digital policies, among others<sup>90</sup> - (only one Member State (Romania) referenced the digital single market Strategy).

**Overall, ESF TO10 operations are well aligned with other EU policies in the field of education and training, including the ET 2020 strategic framework.** They are also in general well aligned with the EU's new policies and policy priorities which have emerged since 2014, such as the **digital education action plan**<sup>91</sup>, the **Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems**<sup>92</sup> and the **education priorities of the action plan for the**

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<sup>84</sup> European 2020 – A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth: <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> European Pillar of Social Rights – Building a more inclusive and fairer European Union: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_en)

<sup>86</sup> Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Finland and the UK.

<sup>87</sup> Belgium, Ireland, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and Romania.

<sup>88</sup> European Commission, 2015. Policy roadmap for the implementation of the social investment package: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1044&newsId=1807&furtherNews=yes>

<sup>89</sup> Communication from the Commission 2013. Towards social investment for growth and cohesion including implementing the European Social Fund 2014 – 2020. staff working document(2013) 39 final.

<sup>90</sup> Annex 6.1 – EU-level Delphi survey findings.

<sup>91</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en)

<sup>92</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0271>



**integration of third-country nationals**<sup>93</sup>, which was launched in response to the 2015 migrant crisis. Moreover, evidence, from ESF-funded operations shows that the ESF has supported the implementation of these policies on the ground. Investments made under TO10 also contribute to the Skills Agenda for Europe<sup>94</sup>, particular via interventions funded under 10iii and 10iv. However, due principally to ESF's national focus, few of the operations funded by ESF TO10 use EU policy tools (e.g. EQF<sup>95</sup>, ECVET<sup>96</sup>, EQAVET<sup>97</sup>).

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. The 2017 Commission staff working document on the added value of **ex-ante conditionalities**<sup>98</sup> highlights some examples: in Czechia, a detailed action plan for inclusive education was implemented to fulfil the ex-ante conditionalities on early leavers from education and training, addressing the repeated country specific recommendation on the need to include disadvantaged children (including Roma) in mainstream schools.

#### 5.4.2.2 *Coherence with other EU instruments*

**ESF TO8 operations also complement actions aiming to improve the competitiveness of SMEs (TO3) and research and innovation (TO1) mostly supported by the ERDF.** However, the integration between the ESF and the ERDF is not always straightforward and strengthened coordination could further encourage integrated projects. Only 8.9% of the respondents to the public consultation considered that they are not aligned.

Another **important ESF TO8 synergy of is with the EURES** (mobility) axis of the EaSI programme<sup>99</sup>; in some countries ESF directly supports the EURES network. In general, there is a good level of complementarity with other structural funds and EU programmes, although there are not many instances in which this complementarity gives life to multi-fund projects. As

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<sup>93</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication\\_action\\_plan\\_integration\\_third-country\\_nationals\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_action_plan_integration_third-country_nationals_en.pdf)

<sup>94</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381>

<sup>95</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9620-2017-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>96</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708\(02\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708(02)&from=EN)

<sup>97</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708(01)&from=EN)

<sup>98</sup> European Commission (2017), The value added of ex-ante conditionalities in the European Structural and Investment Funds, staff working document(2017) 127 final.

<sup>99</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1081>

regards support to labour mobility, more specific issues like complementarity with Interreg and facilitation of life of frontier workers and employers could be explored.

There is evidence to suggest that **ERDF funds** for infrastructure such as housing and social structures **were complementary to ESF support for TO9**. There is some evidence that **goods purchased with FEAD funds** were used to support the provision of **more comprehensive measures funded through ESF** support for TO9. Though little was used under ESF, community led local development (CLLD) has provided a way to channel resources from different funds (notably the **EARDF**) to support integrated, local solutions promoted by local private and public actors.

The **coordinated use of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) with ESF support was less common**, but at least in Italy this combination has made it possible to offer more support to migrants following the 2015 crisis. Limited coordination across funds, as well as the complexities linked to drawing from different funds, were identified as reasons for not (further) pursuing the integrated use of funds.

**As regards ESF TO10 operations, there are many examples of ESF coherence with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Erasmus+** both at operational programme and operation level. However, examples for the other European Structural and Investment Funds are more limited (notably the EARDF and other funding instruments such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)<sup>100</sup> and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA).

There are **synergies between ESF TO10 and ERDF funding**, and they provide very valuable and complementary support to major reforms and structural change in the field of education and training. Examples include major reforms in early childhood education and care or in digital education, for instance in Croatia or Slovenia. The level of coherence and complementarity is also high between ESF TO10 and **Erasmus+**, and there are several good examples of synergies in practice. One such example is ESF funding being used to provide top-up support for disadvantaged students and support their mobility under Erasmus+, or upscale Erasmus+ projects.

As regards coherence **with the EARDF, some examples of good synergies** are presented in the 2019 Evaluation of the impact of the CAP on generational renewal, local development and jobs in rural areas<sup>101</sup>. The evidence from this evaluation shows that, coherence between EU funds has improved in the current programming period compared with previous ones. There is coherence between the EARDF and the ESF, particularly in those Member States where the different policies are delivered together by sub-regional delivery bodies or similar arrangements (e.g. local development companies in Ireland delivering social inclusion programmes, local integrated approaches in some regions of Italy, and chambers of agriculture in France mobilising ESF support to train candidates receiving EARDF support).

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<sup>100</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/financing/fundings/migration-asylum-borders/asylum-migration-integration-fund/union-actions\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/financing/fundings/migration-asylum-borders/asylum-migration-integration-fund/union-actions_en)

<sup>101</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4bd0b0a2-0503-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1>

Examples of potential synergies with other EU funding instruments such as AMIF or the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (Horizon 2020) being used, are limited, despite high levels of coherence in the legal texts. Although alignment with the objectives of EU policy tools such as ECVET, EQF and EQAVET exists on paper, examples of using of these tools in ESF TO10 operations or programming are rare, especially compared to Erasmus+ projects. This is potentially due to the fact that transnational cooperation is not a priority under ESF, which limits the need to align activities with EU frameworks.

#### *5.4.2.3 Coherence with national policies*

ESF TO8 investments are generally underpinned by country specific recommendations and thus contribute to addressing the challenges identified. This is also attributable to the negotiation process that has taken place at the programming stage between the Commission and the Member States; the negotiation process continues during implementation as Member States negotiate with the amendments and changes to the operational programmes. Operations funded under TO8 are generally coherent with other policies and strategies supporting employment and mobility at the national and regional levels.

This coherence is confirmed by positive evidence from evaluations and the case study analyses. This is the case for instance for evaluations in the Veneto, Hamburg, Central Macedonia, Lombardia, Umbria, Thüringen and Lubuskie operational programmes. In Veneto, an evaluation found that that the operational programme is coherent with the regional comprehensive strategy for 2014-2020. In Hamburg, the ESF's coherence with European and national strategies is reported as high and the link between the ESF and these strategies increased in the last two years. The evaluation also showed that the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020 provides a useful complement to the policy framework. Operations implemented by the Croatian employment service and financed by the European Social Fund are complementary to the guidelines for the implementation of an active employment policy in the Republic of Croatia for the 2015-2017 and 2018-2020 periods.

In France, the TO8 focus on entrepreneurship is coherent and complementary with the national pact on growth, competitiveness and employment. Together these actions: (i) support companies' development and investments, by introducing entrepreneurship in the educational programmes of secondary schools and higher education, and (ii) to make it easier to start a business by simplifying processes and adapting support.

Overall ESF support for TO9 was found to be coherent with national and regional policies and programmes. For example, in Greece, ESF support to social inclusion complemented and reinforced a number of means-tested policies aiming to help people in vulnerable situations (minimum income guarantee, child benefits, rent subsidy, heating benefits, ad hoc transfers to the poorest households and ad hoc measures to facilitate access of the most vulnerable to public health care services). In Lithuania, the alignment of ESF actions under TO9 with national and regional policy measures is ensured through the requirement of having a direct link between planned measures with EU and national funds and national/regional strategic documents.

As regards TO10 operations, there is strong coherence between investments under made TO10 and other activities supporting education and training at national and regional level. This close

coherence was further confirmed by most case studies, targeted consultations and, the results of the public consultation. Even greater coherence could be achieved through wider involvement of national/regional stakeholders (including labour market actors and target groups), as well as through better coordination of policies and actions at national/regional level. Target groups themselves (or their representatives) should also be involved in order to better identify and monitor evolving needs.

Overall, Member States have been relatively effective in their use of ESF funds to support national and regional strategic priorities under the various TOs.

## 5.5 EU added value

The assessment of the EU added value of ESF operations has involved the identification of key dimensions and types of effect (See **Box 6** for a description), and the gathering of evidence to determine the extent to which ESF operations have had an effect at the national or regional level that would not have happened without EU interventions. The supporting evaluation studies in general conclude that for all three ESF thematic objectives there is a **good degree of EU added value across all areas**, with substantial evidence pointing to volume, scope, role and process effects.

### *Box 6. Types of ESF added value*

- **Volume effects:** ESF action adds to existing action, either by supporting national action in general ('mirroring') or in specific areas of national policy ('boosting');
- **Scope effects:** ESF action broadens existing action by supporting groups or policy areas that would not otherwise receive support;
- **Role effects:** ESF action supports local/regional innovations that are taken up at national level or national innovative actions that are then mainstreamed;
- **Process effects:** ESF action influences Member-State administrations and organisations involved in the programmes.

### 5.5.1 Volume effects

Evidence shows that ESF **support to employment** has considerably added value in terms of volume effects, as it made it possible to support more people to be supported than would be the case if only national programmes were available. According to a recent study on the impact assessment of human capital investments<sup>102</sup>, the ESF had a significant volume effect, especially through investment priority 8i (Access to employment), which received the largest share of the ESF budget within TO8.

It is difficult to assess the precise extent of the effect but, based on existing evidence, **a high proportion of people supported by the ESF would otherwise have probably simply benefited from passive unemployment support**. This is particularly true in Czechia, where most active labour market policies are co-funded by the ESF. Without ESF support, many disadvantaged people (especially those aged over 55, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed and the low-skilled) would simply receive passive unemployment support.

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<sup>102</sup> FGB, Study supporting the impact assessment of human capital investments, Final report, May 2018.

In **France**, ESF-funded operations are recognised to have a **powerful leverage effect**. The programming strategy is clearly oriented towards a volume effect: ESF funding is mostly used to reinforce existing employment policy (without adding new operations). In the Rhône-Alpes operational programme, for instance, the ‘Mode d’emploi’ operation (which provides intensive individualised support to participants) complements the support provided by the public Employment service. In **Spain**, the ESF operations funded under TO8 allowed intermediate bodies to increase their impact by reaching a wider audience which would not have been possible without the ESF. In **Romania**, operations under investment priorities 8i and 8iii added to the measures financed by the State budget. In **Denmark**, TO8 operations have added value by increasing the number of people who benefited from entrepreneurial training and education and, entrepreneurial support and consultancy, as well as the number of companies involved in skills upgrading. In the Campania operational programme – **Italy**, the volume effect was clear for both the number of actions and the number of participants involved for all investment priorities under TO8; this is due to the integration between ESF funding and national/regional funding for the same types of actions and groups.

**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) and also in terms of boosting funding for social inclusion (5 Member States). The analysis<sup>103</sup> provided examples for each type of volume effect:

- **Complementary to national efforts:** In **Spain** the Special Employment Centres (Centros Especiales de Empleo) focus on labour market integration of workers with disabilities, which is a widespread national policy co-funded by several ESF operational programmes -it provides a partial subsidy towards the wage costs of workers with disabilities in Special Employment Centres. In **Lithuania**, the ESF-supported activation measures for elderly people, complement and boost national policies. In **Italy**, **ESF support to social inclusion** boosted national measures implementing the national anti-poverty strategy.
- **Primary role in social inclusion funding:** In **Hungary**, most measures aiming to support the social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations are funded by ESF. Similarly in **Latvia**, the creation and provision of community-based services helping people with mental disorders lead independent lives and, social care and rehabilitation services for disabled children and their family members, would likely have not been possible at all without ESF support. Moreover, in **Poland**, ESF support to social inclusion promoted the development of the social economy. However, the primary role of ESF support raises some concerns about the longer-term sustainability of these interventions.

The results of the public consultations show that the vast majority of ESF participants, the general public, organisations managing/delivering ESF actions and other organisations all have a **positive perception of the EU added value of ESF support in terms of volume effects**. For instance, for education and training operations, 87.2% out of 370 respondents from organisations directly involved in the management or delivery of ESF actions considered that

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<sup>103</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

‘more can be done than with national resources alone’. Over 80% out of 46 respondents from organisations familiar with the ESF but not directly involved also held this view, as did 73.9% out of 173 members of the general public with an awareness of ESF. For employment support (TO8 public consultation), 48% of all 541 respondents considered that without the ESF there would not be enough money to pay for the supported programmes. The importance of the volume effect of ESF-funded operations was also highlighted during the focus group discussions, in the Policy Delphi survey and in the various case studies.

Only a minority of respondents to the public consultations answered that the EU should not be involved. In the case of social inclusion for instance, 14% (7 of 50 respondents not involved in ESF delivery and not aware of the ESF) felt there was no role for the EU in the promotion of social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination.

### **Box 7. Significant volume effects of ESF support to education and training**

Many of volume effects of **education and training** operations were identified in the supporting study<sup>104</sup>, including: (i) an **increase in the number of participants (teachers/trainers or learners) and learning establishments** that can benefit from education, training or school/college improvement programmes, which increases the geographical scope of implementation of education and training initiatives; and (ii) implementation of innovative education and training programmes at a larger scale than would be possible without ESF support (e.g. inclusive education, adult learning, programmes to help early leavers from education and training). Although volume effects were most visible – and most often cited – for **large-scale interventions across schools (or pre-schools)** under 10i, the supporting study noted volume effects under all investment priorities, with particularly **strong volume effects relating to adult learners** (10iii).

**There are many examples of volume effects across the different Member States.** These include: (i) the ‘Time for Leaders’<sup>105</sup> ESF operation in Lithuania which has already involved over 20 000 educational staff (from pre-school institutions to vocational education centres), and (ii) the PiiCiE operation in Portugal (Plano integrado e inovador de combate ao insucesso escolar), which targets primary and secondary education students and develops a wide range of activities aiming to reduce school failure.

In some Member States whose national education and training budgets were particularly hard hit by the economic crisis, **ESF support allowed the education and training system to continue developing despite the grave impact of the crisis on all levels of education.** This important EU added value was highlighted, for instance, in the case study on the Pomorskie region in Poland, where both the ESF and ERDF helped to plug the gap left by significant cuts in the education and training budget allocated to regions by the central government.

### 5.5.2 Scope effects

Several sources suggest<sup>106</sup> that in some cases, ESF **support to employment operations covered target groups which are not covered by nationally funded operations**, therefore reflecting the

<sup>104</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>105</sup> [www.lyderiulaikas.smm.lt](http://www.lyderiulaikas.smm.lt)

<sup>106</sup> Impact Assessment study, the Labour Market Policies database, focus group and case studies.

scope effect of ESF co-funded operations. Such target groups include young people, entrepreneurs/self-employed, women and older workers.

According to the labour market policies database<sup>107</sup>, this is the case for employment incentives in Estonia, Spain, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia, where the long-term unemployed are specifically targeted only by ESF co-funded operations. The supporting study provides **many relevant examples where ESF operations broadened the target groups**. One example is Estonia, where the supported measures were extended to new target groups (low-skilled, young people, older people, and people with disabilities). Similarly, in **France**, by targeting groups such as women and older people, ESF-funded operations have a leverage effect. In **Italy**, ESF employment operations co-financed under the national system for active employment policies operational programme also broadened the target populations (e.g. to include the unemployed in incentive projects).

The ESF has also contributed to the **broadening of existing operations including the adoption of individualised operations and targeted approaches to focus on the needs of specific groups**. Perhaps its main contribution was to increasing awareness of gender equality and the introduction of specific policies, which were previously noticeably absent in some Member States. In **Germany**, ESF operations play a role in plugging the gap left by national actions related to specific target groups that are hard to reach and specific topics related to employment. These include, for instance, ESF funding for 8iv Equality between men and women; without the ESF, these type of operations would simply not exist. Another example is the 'Unternehmens Wert: Mensch' operation, under which counselling of companies could not be proposed without the ESF support. Finally, there is also some evidence (e.g. Croatia) where the ESF has prioritised investments in hard-to-reach areas that had previously not been priority.

**Box 8. Social inclusion scope effects: broadening actions to more groups**

A scope effect of ESF support to social inclusion was identified in 17 Member States<sup>108</sup>. The ESF provided support for specific target groups that were not covered or that received less coverage in nationally funded interventions. For example, in **Bulgaria**, ESF support to social inclusion covered Roma children and children with special educational needs, in **Denmark** it covered people with 'limited attachment' to the labour market, and in **Croatia** operations supported people with disabilities. **The Netherlands** used ESF to support refugees and Italy used it to help LGBT people facing housing exclusion. In **Austria** the 'Youth College Vienna' project provided education and counselling to young refugees who would have not received support from other sources and who are less likely to have the skills needed to enter training or the labour market.

For **education and training operations, there is strong evidence of scope effects both in terms of broadening actions to new target groups and to new policy areas**. In terms of broadening actions to include new target groups, evidence clearly shows that ESF funding has given

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<sup>107</sup>

<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/explore/all/lmp?lang=en&display=card&sort=category>

<sup>108</sup> Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden and Romania.

education and training providers an opportunity to address more disadvantaged and harder-to-reach groups. This is true in all Member States and across all education sectors and all investment priorities. Such groups include young NEETs, early school leavers, children with low socio-economic status, low-skilled or low-qualified adults, migrants, Roma, people with special educational needs (SEN), people living in remote areas, as older workers and workers with obsolescent skills. The additional cost of reaching out to these groups and providing the sort of individualised and cost-intensive support which they require often means that they are de facto excluded from standard education and training provision. Examples of good practices in this area include the Bulgarian ‘Your Class’ ESF operation<sup>109</sup> and the German ‘Voluntary 10th school year’ operation<sup>110</sup>.

Moreover, ESF funding has allowed education and training providers to address **wider policy areas** such as inclusive education, adult/lifelong learning, non-formal education, digitisation, civic education, developing vocational training in wider/future-oriented sectors and developing soft/transversal competences. Examples include the ‘PuMPuRs’<sup>111</sup> operation targeting early leavers from education and training in Latvia and the ‘digital skills bridge’<sup>112</sup> ESF operation in Luxembourg, which aims to support the development of digital skills for workers affected by digital transformations.

### 5.5.3 Role effects

Evidence on role effect of ESF TO8 operations is mixed. There is little information on the extent to which the operations supported by the ESF supported innovation and the transfer of ideas, although there are some examples of good practice with lessons that can be learned.

#### **Box 9. Examples of TO8 role effects**

- **Limited role effects:** The case studies provide some insight into the ESF’s role effect of the ESF, highlighting that, in Spain and Romania, TO8 operations provided little or no support to innovation. In Spain for instance, innovation was included in ESF actions only to a limited extent due to uncertainty regarding its eligibility. Most supported operations complemented already existing actions, without necessarily introducing new approaches to tackling the problems. A lack of innovative measures was also identified in Romania, particularly for ESF operations focusing on the most disadvantaged groups, such as Roma or low educated people.
- **Substantial role effects:** In Austria, it is reported that the ESF supported innovative operations to promote gender equality (8iv) and support active and healthy ageing (8vi). Similarly, in Germany, the role effects of ESF-funded operations in the field of employment and mobility were recognised at the level of federal and regional operational programmes. Examples include two innovative federal operations supported under investment priority 8v: ‘UnternehmensWert: Mensch’ (which aims to improve working conditions) and ‘IQ-Qualifizierungsprogramm’ (which supports people who need help getting recognition of their certificates). Some elements of the latter

<sup>109</sup> See box A5-1 in Annex 5 of the TO10 supporting study.

<sup>110</sup> See Box 8 in the TO10 supporting study.

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.pumpurs.lv/>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.skillsbridge.lu/>



project were subsequently transferred into actions under regular national funding.

The focus group also highlighted two examples where the ESF created opportunities to test innovative approaches and mainstream theme. In Estonia, peer counselling is proposed for people with disabilities (for instance a disabled worker provides advice to disabled people who are looking for a job or who just started to work and need support). In Malta, in order to provide people with mental disabilities with employment opportunities, work activities are divided into sub-tasks to allow individuals to perform single tasks, which are eventually combined.

In general, the role effect of the ESF TO8 operations was well acknowledged. In Austria, it is reported that the ESF-supported innovative operations to promote gender equality (8iv) and support active and healthy ageing (8vi). Similarly, in Germany, the role effects of ESF funded operations in the field of employment and mobility were recognised both at the level of the federal and regional operational programmes.

ESF TO10 investments have contributed to the transfer of ideas by funding the piloting or wider implementation of ideas from other Member States or from regional to national level. There is also evidence that ESF actions supported innovation in education and training including various ways of modernisation of practices and policies (e.g. digitisation, inclusive education), targeting skills development in new or evolving sectors of the economy (e.g. sustainable development, high-tech industries), testing new or alternative pedagogies (e.g. inclusive educational methods, use of theatre) and developing innovative training offers.

Lastly, ESF TO10 has also led to structural changes in education and training systems including the roll-out or decentralisation of new approaches and policies. Examples of TO10 support for structural changes exist under all investment priorities; one such example is the establishment of the network of regional centres of VET competence in Croatia.

#### 5.5.4 Process effects including sustainability

The TO8 case studies show that there are various benefits for administrations and organisations involved in ESF operations. In Czechia for instance, cooperation between the Managing authority, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, other state institutions, social partners and NGOs (in particular for actions supporting the capacity of labour offices, the social partners and NGOs) was highlighted as a process effect of ESF operations.

The process effects of ESF supported operations were also largely recognised during the focus group discussions. ES operations increased inter-institutional cooperation, for example in Bulgaria, where social partners and social services now work together, as a result of the cooperation needed to implement individual centred approaches to support people into (or closer to) employment.

As regards the continuity of EU-supported operations after funding ends, there is increasing evidence of them being mainstreamed into national policies especially in socio-economic contexts that is more favourable compared to the financial crisis. Thus, the systemic changes achieved through the implementation of ESF TO8 support are likely to remain even after ESF funding ends.

Managing authorities consider that it is still too early to assess the sustainability of TO9 support. ESF-funded TO9 operations generated process effects by improving the administrative for capacity and knowledge of the design and delivery of services.

Similarly, ESF TO10 support generated positive effects which are likely to continue after the end of funding. There is a strong likelihood of ongoing benefits at all three levels: individual, institutional and policy.

However, the COVID19 pandemic may affect the sustainability of the positive effects of operations run under the ESF's three ESF thematic objectives.

At individual level, ESF TO10 operations had an immediate positive impact on many people across the EU. The public consultation confirmed this positive impact with a large proportion of ESF participants reporting that the support had made a positive difference to their situation: over half said that, without EU support, there would be fewer or no opportunities for people in their situation. Key outcomes mentioned by individual respondents included: learning new skills and/or getting a qualification, feeling more confident, starting a new education or training course, and improving employment conditions, such as increasing salary or receiving a promotion.

These immediate results of participation in TO10 ESF-funded operations are likely to have lasting impacts on the lives and life chances of most people involved.

The findings also identify to sustainable impacts of ESF TO10 support at institutional level. Many of the effects on institutions are likely to have a long-lasting impact. For example:

- Improvements to the competences of teachers and trainers are likely to contribute to long-term improvements of the institutions in which they work, for example through improved teaching skills and methods, increased awareness of how to deal with diversity, better organisation and more innovation. Once new approaches and methods are introduced, evidence suggests that it is unlikely that institutions will 'slip back' to old ways and instead will continue a positive trajectory of ongoing improvements.
- The links established with other organisations and the wider community (families, communities, NGOs, employers, other education and training providers, etc.) will also remain in place, and continue to provide a more effective and integrated context for educational and training activities.
- The investments in new teaching curricula (e.g. in Croatia), resources and methods will benefit institutions for many years beyond the end of ESF funding.

ESF TO10 funding also had many policy impacts that are highly likely to have sustainable positive effects. Examples highlighted in the supporting study include ESF support for: the establishment of the Maltese systematic approach to addressing early leavers from education and training; the testing and introduction of the dual learning system in Belgium (Flanders); the new start programme to ensure that VET schools in Greece better adapt to the needs of students from more vulnerable backgrounds; and the introduction of a major digital education reform in Croatia..

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from the three thematic evaluation-supporting studies underpin the following overarching conclusions on 2014-2018 ESF operations.

The **assessment of effectiveness** has shown that there has been **progress in the financial implementation of ESF programmes and in the achievement of participation and result targets**. However there are large differences in performance across countries, operational programmes and investment priorities. There were initial delays in implementing ESF operations and financial execution is lagging 7% behind the comparable stage of the previous programming period. Nevertheless, by the end of 2018, implementation rates were generally on track to meet the targets by the end of the programming period; although, administrative capacity to deliver operations remains a constraint in some countries and (especially) within less developed regions.

Overall, across the EU, 27% of planned resources were spent by the end of 2018, and the project selection rates<sup>113</sup> were around 70%. As regards **output targets** they show good progress, as 22.2 million participations were reported covering the specific target groups of each ESF thematic objective (with higher shares of unemployed participants in employment operations, of disadvantaged groups in social inclusion ones and of inactive and young people in education and training).

Although implementation is still ongoing and comprehensive results data are still to be reported, the evaluation has nevertheless highlighted some **significant achievements**. There has been good progress in achieving results from participation in ESF-funded operations, as 9.5 million positive results were reported in total by December 2018 (this includes participants engaged in job searching or who found a job; including self-employment; entered education/training or gained a qualification).

There is evidence that ESF operations have a **sustainable positive impact on participants**. In addition to the reported impacts in terms of gains of employment and education and qualifications, both in the immediate and longer-term, a wide range of 'soft' outcomes were identified notably for employment and social inclusion operations. Such outcomes are quite widespread but underreported, as they are not part of the common indicators. The most common soft outcomes are soft skills, increased self-esteem and improved labour market prospects.

The three evaluation-supporting studies have identified some notable achievements at the level of investment priorities and types of operations:

**Within ESF support to employment, the most successful operations have been access to employment for the unemployed.** The assessment confirms varying but positive effects in terms of employment chances for unemployed participants due to the support they received. In addition, exploratory research on overall macroeconomic impacts tends to confirm that support is beneficial and sustainable for several regions with high unemployment levels. Also, ESF

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<sup>113</sup> This is the ratio of funds allocated by the Managing Authority to specific projects or operations over the total amount available (by TO) or indicatively planned (by IP).

operations have contributed to the development of a more adaptable workforce and have helped improve the employability of the participants. ESF support has been most effective – in terms of supporting employment - for individuals who are at a certain distance from the labour market, i.e. neither close (such as well qualified individuals) nor too far away from it (e.g. those with multiple disadvantages).

More than half of results generated for ESF support to **social inclusion** were for Type 1 operations (employment-focused actions). An additional 35% of results were generated for Type 6 operations (action 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.

As regards **education and training**, early leavers from education and training and lifelong learning operations have been more successful in terms of both direct results and the potential for longer-term systemic change. The relative success of these priorities appears to relate to their stronger alignment with national and regional strategic priorities. Many successful types of operations have been identified - ranging from support to vulnerable learners and the teaching staff that work with them, to digital innovations in the classrooms and local action plans to address early leavers from education and training. However, many Member States have faced challenges preventing from achieving positive results under ESF tertiary education operations.

On top of the positive results for participants in ESF operations, the modelling of ESF impacts based on RHOMOLO<sup>114</sup> simulations suggests that the programme will have final **positive macroeconomic impacts** (measured as additional EU GDP and jobs compared to baseline) as a result of the ESF human capital investments, which enhance the productivity of the labour force and increase participation in the labour market, among other effects. The final estimated impact would add 0.26% to European GDP by 2023, and 316 000 jobs.

Therefore, although it is not possible to fully disentangle the impact of ESF funding from other context factors, there is clear evidence on the **positive contribution of ESF operations to the overarching objectives of ESF support to employment, social inclusion and education towards the EU 2020 targets**, both from a micro and a macro perspective (based on results achievements, qualitative evidence from stakeholder views and micro and macro econometric modelling).

Finally, significant potential for **long-term impacts was identified through ESF support for the development of system level changes and sustainable innovative measures**. Qualitative evidence (country-based analyses including case studies) suggest that ESF support to social inclusion also had broader level impacts including enhanced access to public services, deinstitutionalisation, and cross-sectoral collaborations to promote innovative approaches. Education and training operations greatly support systemic change, enhancing changes in

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<sup>114</sup> RHOMOLO is the spatial computable general equilibrium model of the European Commission, see for details: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/rhomolo>

government policy approaches to education, particularly visible for early leavers from education and training and lifelong learning operations.

The **analysis of efficiency** has shown that there was a high level of variation across investment priorities and Member States in the cost-effectiveness of the different types of operations. The large variance in the cost per participation reflects the wide range of types of operation and delivery mechanisms, as well as the different costs levels in the Member States.

Overall **cost-benefit analyses attempted** for social inclusion<sup>115</sup> and education and training<sup>116</sup> suggest positive returns particularly under active inclusion, early leavers from education and training and tertiary education operations, however a note of caution should be attached to the results as a number of broad assumptions needed to be applied, given the limitations of the monitoring data and the evaluation evidence.

Actual and perceived administrative burdens have hampered effective implementation, through delays, and also have impacted cost-effectiveness. New monitoring systems and databases have been developed at Member State level to comply with regulatory changes since the 2007-2013 programming period, but a more significant factor is insufficient administrative capacity, which in turn impacts implementation.

**At this stage of the implementation, efficiency can only be approached through cost per participation.** The large variance reflects the wide range of types of operations and delivery mechanisms, as well as the different costs levels in the Member States. The cost-benefit analyses carried out for social inclusion and education and training support suggest positive returns particularly under active inclusion, early leavers from education and training and tertiary education operations. **ESF administrative requirements are considered to be proportionate to the benefits achieved.** Nonetheless, there is recognition that these requirements can be complex and time-consuming, making them onerous for smaller beneficiary organisations, for example those working with specific target groups or schools.

In support to employment operations, there have been **additional costs** for recruiting and delivering ESF to harder-to-reach groups, especially those in remote/rural areas. As regards social inclusion, other key factors that limit the efficiency of ESF operations include gold plating and drawing on other EU funds (e.g. ERDF, CF) to support the operational programme. The complexity of administering an operational programme with multiple funds may have led to delayed implementation and generation of results. For education and training support, there was also evidence that having many partners involved in implementation can result in delays.

Qualitative analysis has shown that **factors that can foster efficiency include the use of intermediary bodies, wider partnership arrangement, including specialist sectoral organisations, and simplified cost options (SCOs).** The introduction of SCOs may lead to an initial increase in administrative burden for some beneficiaries that need to adjust procedures

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<sup>115</sup> See TO9 supporting study:  
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

<sup>116</sup> See TO10 supporting study:  
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

and train their staff. Over time, however, the use of SCOs can promote the take-up of ESF and lower the administrative burden.

Overall, **there was a high degree of relevance of ESF to employment, social inclusion and education policy needs and to the needs of target groups** requiring support, at the programming and implementation levels. Programming remained relevant throughout the programming period to date, as the operational programmes have proved to be flexible enough to adapt to socio-economic and policy changes. The flexibility of OPs allowed Member States to deal with unexpected shifts in the socio-economic context, such as the 2015 refugee crisis.

In terms of target groups reached, the evidence shows that ESF operations were generally aligned to their needs but that **challenges remain in reaching and addressing the needs of some groups, particularly the most disadvantaged ones**. Support to employment managed to reach participants in high need of support, including the inactive, the long-term unemployed and migrants. The low budget available, lengthy implementation periods and a need for more holistic and informed approaches resulted in issues linked to active ageing and embedded gender stereotypes being little or hardly addressed. The supporting study shows that ESF support was most relevant when combined with other measures that support the participants (including health, housing, etc.), especially those furthest away from the labour market.

ESF support for social inclusion reached a substantially higher share of people with a disability, migrants, people with a foreign background and minorities, as well as those with low education than did support to employment and labour mobility and education operations, which is fully consistent with the focus and target groups of social inclusion. However, evidence as to whether ESF support to social inclusion reached the most vulnerable populations with the greatest needs is mixed due to the challenges in identifying these groups with the existing common indicators, as these are necessarily broad groups relevant at the EU level. The assessment also identified risks of 'creaming', i.e. targeting less vulnerable people with less complex needs who can get better results.

The biggest challenges faced by education and training operations have been to reach some disadvantaged groups, and they have registered lower participation shares for these groups as compared to other ESF operations. Refugees and migrants, Roma, the long-term unemployed, older workers and people with disabilities were identified as the most challenging groups to engage. In particular, improving access to higher education for vulnerable population groups is a big challenge, as disadvantaged groups have been hard to reach for ESF tertiary education operations because of difficulties in developing collaborative relationships between the tertiary sector and schools.

Ensuring relevance to needs was fostered by a **number of factors** including the needs analyses in partnership agreements, a flexible approach to programming, allowing adaptation of operational programmes and planned actions to any changing needs of Member States/regions, and close alignment of ESF priorities with the European Semester and its country-specific recommendations. The assessment found that the European Semester is a strong framework for ensuring that ESF operations are relevant to target groups. **Improvements to relevance could, however be made through enhanced consultation with actors closer to the needs of target groups**, such as NGOs, social partners and, training providers. While these actors were involved

and consulted to some extent – in part thanks to the partnership principle enshrined in the ESI Funds – there is room for more meaningful consultation and more engagement with a broader range of actors in the needs assessment, programming and implementation stages.

The assessment also showed that ESF operations have a **good overall degree of internal and external coherence**. They are **well aligned with other EU policies and initiatives** in the field of employment, social inclusion and education and have supported their concrete implementation on the ground. There is also a **good degree of coherence with the European Semester CSRs** which are well reflected overall in the situation analyses of partnership agreements, helping address the challenges identified, thanks to the negotiation process between Commission and Member States. at the programming stage. Moreover, coherence was improved thanks to the **fulfilment of ESF ex-ante conditionalities, which lead to structural reforms**, although this also caused some delays in ESF implementation (e.g. in Romania).

ESF employment, social inclusion and education and training operations are **internally coherent (between different thematic objectives) and between investment priorities within each thematic objective**. ESF support to social inclusion has a high potential overlap with some support to employment operations (e. g. promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility), and actions that could have been programmed under other thematic objectives may have been programmed under social inclusion to meet the requirement that Member States allocate at least 20% of ESF funds to this thematic objective. However, actual overlaps are low due to the different target groups addressed and the more holistic approach taken under social inclusion.

**Coherence with other EU funding instruments in related fields is more mixed**: while there is often good coherence in the legal texts, evidence of synergies in implementation varies, and a variety of challenges in combining different funds were identified. ESF employment operations show a good level of complementarity with ERDF thematic objective 3 (competitiveness of SMEs). However, integration with ESF can be improved. Employment operations also show significant synergies with other EU-funded programmes, namely EaSI, the European Globalisation Fund and the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund.

ESF social inclusion support was also combined with other EU funds, the most common EU fund being the ERDF. While strong complementarities were found among examples of OPs that draw on ESF and other EU funds, the complexities involved in the implementation of multi-fund OPs imply delays in implementation.

In education and training operations, good examples of coherence in implementation were nonetheless found in particular with ERDF and Erasmus+, however only to a very limited degree with other funding instruments (e.g. Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions).

ESF operations are **well aligned with national and regional policies** in the Member States. Such complementarity can take the form of ESF having a supporting role for local policies or filling policy gaps. However, alignment and complementarity with national policies could be improved concerning operations supporting horizontal themes such as social innovation or regarding tertiary education ESF operations.

ESF operations have generated **a good degree of EU added value across all dimensions**, with substantial evidence pointing to volume, scope, role and process effect., There were **important volume effects** in terms of the increased participation of target groups (e.g. teachers and learners in education operations), the number of actions, and widening the geographical scope and scale of implementation of key programmes. Therefore ESF support is playing a pivotal role in funding employment, social inclusion and education policies that complement national efforts.

**Scope effects were also clear**, particularly for broadening actions to wider target groups that would have not been supported otherwise, including many disadvantaged groups (e.g. social inclusion operations supported Roma children and children with special educational needs, people with disabilities, people facing housing exclusion and refugees, whereas education and training ESF support covered Roma, older workers and low-skilled adults). There were also scope effects in addressing policy areas which were not previously high priorities on the agenda (e.g. inclusive education, adult learning and, non-formal education).

ESF operations also played an **important role in supporting the transfer of ideas and the introduction of innovations and structural reforms**. In employment operations the ESF has fostered innovation especially in the support of harder-to-reach groups, including those with disabilities, and those from remote rural areas and there is evidence of mainstreaming, with innovative approaches being adopted by Member States as part of their labour market programmes (e.g. the ESF has helped to raise the profile of gender issues and promoted social innovation). In social inclusion innovation has focused on the use of individualised and targeted approaches, especially toward migrants, older workers and women. The ESF also supported the improvement of existing national frameworks (e.g. through the establishment of monitoring and coordination mechanisms, design and implementation of integrated approaches to combating social exclusion), and allowed for the testing of new partnerships. In education and training, significant innovation effects were recorded, with the use of digitisation and new pedagogies, as well as structural reforms such as the development of local or regional education strategies or the rolling-out of new educational approaches and strategies nationwide. Role effects could however potentially be further enhanced through a greater focus on peer learning, transnational cooperation, visibility of ESF support and, dissemination of results of ESF-funded operations.

**Many process effects** from ESF operations are also in evidence. Crucially, the ESF has helped build effective delivery capacity in Member States in terms of programme and cost management and monitoring systems, and awareness and knowledge of target groups. Relevant examples include improved administrative capacity and knowledge in the design and delivery of services promoting social inclusion, improvements to governance and organisation of the offer of education and training, and establishing closer links and cooperation between schools and training providers with other stakeholders at local/regional or national level.



## 6.1 Lessons learned

The supporting studies provided evidence on those factors that seem to lead to better use of the ESF funding and on the main points for improvement<sup>117</sup>.

**Operational programme strategies should be integrated and embedded into national (or regional) strategies.** Shared management entails that the actual day-to-day management of operational programmes is entrusted to official national (or regional) bodies. Performance is enhanced by a strong strategic approach which informs the prioritisation and targeting of resources to address specific needs. This is clearly the case when the ESF is used to increase the volume of support offered. It is also the case when innovative approaches are tested before, if successful, being mainstreamed. All thematic objectives included actions intended to impact structures and systems. Success requires the active support from the national (or regional and local) actors concerned.

**Institutional capacity, at all levels of implementation, and regulatory requirements, are linked and strongly influence effectiveness.** Managing authorities have to lead strong coordination processes involving local and regional authorities and key partners such as NGOs, civil society organisations and social partners. Beneficiaries in turn must have the capacity to deliver ESF operations on the scale required. They may need to rely on the managing authorities to build the capacity of their staff on how to access, implement and monitor the ESF. The issues most commonly cited as placing a high demand on the capacity are the setting up and operation of the monitoring and control systems, the definition and roll-out of simplified cost options, and the application of state aid regulations.

**Strong partnerships are required.** Greater cross-sectoral cooperation between education, health, labour market, social services and services dealing with territorial planning and development should be fostered at all levels (EU, national, regional) to address the complex needs of target groups. This is especially important in the delivery of personalised operations or integrated support of interventions that need to follow up on each other and cannot be conducted in parallel. Local actors, civil society organisations and NGOs, often play a crucial role in engaging with harder to reach target groups. Yet **the partnership principle is not always fully implemented** in practice, with stakeholders pointing out some examples of superficial consultation processes that hindered meaningful engagement of partners across all areas of programme design, implementation and monitoring. Moreover, having a high number of partners makes more demands on the institutional capacity of the managing authorities and may therefore come to be a constraint on efficient delivery. Managing authorities may be sometimes avoid these local actors, civil society organisations and NGOs, precisely because of the perceived demand on their institutional capacity. **Diversifying the stakeholder groups that are consulted remains an important area for improvement**, as public authorities, especially from the national and regional levels, are often overrepresented.

**The correct alignment of operations to the needs of the target group is another success factor.** It is the form and suitability of the support offered to participants that determines its net

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<sup>117</sup> The supporting studies provide additional lessons learned and points for improvement specific for each ESF thematic objective.

effects, irrespective of where it is implemented and where the money comes from, ESF or non-ESF. Overall, there is strong evidence that the most important needs of the main target groups of each ESF thematic objective were taken on board. **Nevertheless, ESF operations did not always fully succeed in reaching and addressing the needs of some specific target groups, particularly the most disadvantaged ones.** It is the precise identification of a target group that allows account to be taken of the additional efforts required to reach it, rather than reaching those for whom a result can be generated more easily. The alignment of operations to the needs of the target group does not need to take place in the operational programme stage itself. Some operational programmes attributed their flexibility to a broad definition of target groups, at the planning stage, narrowed down during implementation.

**ESF-supported actions bring about changes in number of areas** including individual behaviour and/or social roles **well beyond employment, labour mobility and education outcomes but these are poorly documented.** Outcomes such as qualifications can be captured and adequately analysed by using the existing set of indicators. However, these soft-outcomes are quite widespread among participants, difficult to capture in quantitative terms and thus underreported. Efforts could be made to improve the systems to this end, including through experimenting with “distance travelled” approaches.

**More should be done to promote the visibility of ESF support and mutual learning.** Adopting a greater focus on dissemination of ESF results and good practices, with a robust consideration of success factors, challenges and transferability – at EU, national, regional and operation level – has potential to inspire other potential beneficiaries, and ensure that lessons learned in addressing key challenges and reaching specific target groups are better shared among the community of practitioners. A focus on dissemination would also ensure better visibility of the contributions of ESF across the EU, and could foster greater absorption and improved funding applications. As seen in the supporting studies, there was evidence of non-awareness of the opportunities offered by ESF support.

Finally, **in order to provide robust evidence on the impacts of the ESF-financed interventions, more timely availability of data is crucial.** No proper cost effectiveness analysis could be done at this stage due to incompleteness of data, as reporting on outputs, results and costs is not synchronised and operations are not completed. Moreover, the counterfactual impact evaluations require detailed data not only on the participants but also on the non-participants, and thus data collection should be planned well in advance.

## ANNEX 1: PROCEDURAL INFORMATION

### Lead DG, Decide Planning/CWP references

This evaluation was carried out by DG EMPL, as a result of three different initiatives related to the ESF support to policies in the areas of:

- Employment and labour mobility (thematic objective 8) under the Decide number PLAN/2018/3178. The initiative was published in July 2018.
- Social inclusion (thematic objective 9) under the Decide number PLAN/2018/3177. The initiative was published in December 2018.
- Education and training (thematic objective 10) under the Decide number PLAN/2018/3147. The initiative was published on December 2018.

### Organisation and timing

#### 2.1. Thematic objective 8:

An Inter-Service Steering Group (ISSG) was created in July 2018. The invitation launched on 17 July 2018 was addressed to the following DGs: AGRI, BUDG, EAC, GROW, HOME, JRC, JUST, MARE, REGIO, RTD, SG and SJ.

The timing of the evaluation was as follows:

20 July 2018 - 17 August 2018	Publication of the roadmap and feedback period
8 August 2018 - 28 September 2018	Two rounds of consultation of ISSG via written procedure
19 October 2019	Request for services for the external study supporting the evaluation
4 March 2019	Signature of the contract for the supporting study with the consortium led by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini
19 March 2019	1 <sup>st</sup> meeting of the ISSG: kick-off meeting for the supporting study
17 April 2019	2 <sup>nd</sup> meeting of the ISSG: draft inception report of the supporting study
11 September 2019	3 <sup>rd</sup> meeting of the ISSG: draft interim report of the supporting study
13 January 2020	Final deliverable of the Rhomolo modelling
12 February 2020	Draft final report of the study
18 February 2020	4 <sup>th</sup> meeting of the ISSG: draft final report of the supporting study
September 2020	Written consultation on the draft staff working document

## 2.2. Thematic objective 9:

An Inter-Service Steering Group (ISSG) was created in December 2018. The invitation was addressed to the following DGs: AGRI, BUDG, EAC, GROW, HOME, JRC, JUST, REGIO and SG.

The timing of the evaluation was as follows:

19 December 2018 - 16 January 2019	Publication of the roadmap and feedback period
17 December 2018	1st meeting of the ISSG
d1 February 2019	Request for services for the external study supporting the evaluation
16 May 2019	Signature of the contract for the supporting study with the consortium ICF-
17 May 2019	2nd meeting of the ISSG: kick-off meeting for the supporting study
26 June 2019	3rd meeting of the ISSG: draft inception report of the supporting study
14 November 2019	4th meeting of the ISSG: draft interim report of the supporting study
28 February 2020	Draft final report of the supporting study
5 March 2020	Final deliverable of the Rhomolo modelling
September 2020	Written consultation on the draft staff working document

## 2.3. Thematic objective 10:

An Inter-Service Steering Group (ISSG) was created in January 2019, which included the following DGs: EMPL, BUDG, EAC, HOME, JRC, REGIO and SG.

The timing of the evaluation was as follows:

21 December 2018 - 18 January 2019	Publication of the roadmap and feedback period
25 January 2019	1st meeting of the ISSG
28 February 2019	Request for services for the external study supporting the evaluation
6 June 2019	Signature of the contract for the supporting study with the consortium ECORYS-Ismeri
12 June 2019	2nd meeting of the ISSG: kick-off meeting for the supporting study
12 July 2019	3rd meeting of the ISSG: draft inception report of the supporting study
20 November 2019	4th meeting of the ISSG: draft interim report of the supporting study
6 April 2020	Draft final report of the supporting study
2 June 2020	Final deliverable of the Rhomolo modelling
September 2020	Written consultation on the draft staff working document

## Exceptions to the better regulation guidelines

N/A

## Consultation of the RSB (if applicable)

N/A

## Evidence, sources and quality

Each of the three initiatives were based on three main instruments:

- An EU-wide public consultation, which was carried out and analysed with the assistance of the external team of experts.
- A supporting study carried out by an external team of experts, through a contract (VC/2019/0089 for thematic objective 8, VC/2019/0268 for thematic objective 9 and VC/2019/0351 for thematic objective 10)<sup>118</sup>, through DG EMPL Multiple Framework Contract VT/2016-027 for the provision of services related to the implementation of the better regulation guidelines. The supporting study combined the results of the two other tools together with additional work, such as desk research, public consultations, case studies, interviews with stakeholders, focus groups and Delphi surveys (see Annex 2 for more details).
- An estimate of macroeconomic effects of ESF supported operations using the Dynamic Computable General Equilibrium RHOMOLO of the Joint Research Centre, through an Administrative agreement between DG EMPL and the JRC-Seville.

All three Inter-Service Steering Groups assessed the quality of the final report of the external contractors as satisfactory.

The conclusions and findings of the evaluation are considered as robust, within the limitations and the mitigating measures described in section 4 and annex 3 of this staff working document.

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<sup>118</sup> The links to the reports are:

For TO8: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8330&furtherPubs=yes>

For TO9: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>

For TO10: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

## ANNEX 2: STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This synopsis report outlines the consultation activities that were organised as part of the evaluation of ESF support to (1) employment and labour mobility (excluding youth employment), (2) social inclusion and (3) education and training for the 2014-2020 programming period and presents the main findings.

### 2. CONSULTATION STRATEGIES

#### 2.1. Objectives

To ensure transparency and involve stakeholders as much as possible, the consultations were organised in line with the standards and methods set out in the better regulation guidelines. As set out in their respective roadmaps and strategies, all **consultation activities** aimed to collect views and evidence from stakeholders on the visibility, outreach, usefulness, relevance and effectiveness of the ESF support.

#### 2.2. Consultation stakeholders

When identifying the stakeholders to consult, consideration was given to the impact of ESF support (direct, indirect and potential) on individuals and organisations, and their degree of involvement. The stakeholders targeted by the consultation were organisations or individuals that:

- had or might have participated in the operations; or
- had or might have run or been involved in running the operations; or
- had an interest in social inclusion operations funded under the ESF; or
- had expertise in the subject.

**Stakeholders involved in managing the funds** were consulted regularly. Member State representatives involved in ESF monitoring and evaluation were informed of the progress of the supporting study, the interim findings as well as the final findings and conclusions at the Evaluation Partnership meetings held between February 2019 and June 2020.

The draft reports and individual country factsheets (both in the original English version and in the national languages) were circulated to the evaluation partnership members and desk officers working for the Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, for comments. The comments received were mostly to flag inconsistencies in data related to individual Member States, which were subsequently corrected. All the supporting studies' deliverables of (reports, country factsheet and related annexes for example on methodology and mapping) were uploaded on 'CIRCABC', the ESF Evaluation Partnership's online workspace <sup>119</sup>.

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<sup>119</sup> [https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/58263cb1-f430-4a10-88c7-eaf436177c89/library/ba675037-3cd1-402d-8170-57c4a269ad39?p=1&n=10&sort=modified\\_DESC](https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/58263cb1-f430-4a10-88c7-eaf436177c89/library/ba675037-3cd1-402d-8170-57c4a269ad39?p=1&n=10&sort=modified_DESC)

### 3. THEMATIC OBJECTIVE 8 - EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MOBILITY

#### 3.1. The consultation strategy

##### 3.1.1. Roadmap

The evaluation roadmap was published on the Commission's 'Have your Say' portal and made available for public feedback between 20 July and 17 August 2018<sup>120</sup>. No contributions were received in this context.

##### 3.1.2. Consultation stakeholders

The following groups were consulted:

- (1) **Participants:** individuals supported by the European Social Fund operations were consulted to obtain a direct insight into: (i) the extent to which the operations met the "integration in the labour market and mobility" objective, and (ii) success factors that cannot be directly identified through the monitoring mechanisms.
- (2) **Organisations involved in the management of operational programmes** such as: Member states, managing authorities at national and/or regional level, intermediate bodies and, social partners represented in the monitoring committee;
- (3) **Organisations involved in the delivery of ESF funded operations** such as beneficiaries or project partners including public bodies, NGOs and local authorities. Their feedback helped to identify efficiency and delivery issues in the implementation of ESF operations.
- (4) **Organisations not directly involved** in the operations but that, representing the people targeted by the ESF - more specifically people at risk of social exclusion - and can therefore provide a broader view of the needs and of issues faced by recipients and potential recipients.
- (5) **Academic and research bodies** involved in the field of employment and mobility, that could provide insight as to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence or sustainability of measures;
- (6) **Organisations representing employers**, that can give feedback on the factors that play a role in the successful integration of end recipients, and young people in general, in the labour market;
- (7) **General public:** any individual or organisation that could provide useful views on how the EU can support employment and labour mobility and the other aims of thematic objective 8 (TO8).

##### 3.1.3. Consultation methods and tools

To adequately reach these stakeholders, a range of consultation activities and methods were used namely, a public consultation, over 60 targeted interviews (including interviews with EU and national level stakeholders, 10 case studies<sup>121</sup> which also included consultations with key stakeholders in the form of in-depth interviews), and a validation process on the evaluation's

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<sup>120</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/1862-Evaluation-of-the-support-to-employment-and-mobility-by-the-European-Social-Fund/public-consultation>

<sup>121</sup> Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Malta, Portugal, Italy, Poland and Slovakia.

draft findings involving experts working together in focus groups in four Member States (Spain, Croatia, Luxembourg & Romania) and one at EU level.

**Table 1: Overview of the stakeholders reached through each consultation tool/method**

Type of stakeholder	Targeted interviews	Public consultation	Validation focus groups
Participants		x	
Organisations involved in the management of operational programmes	x	x	x
Organisations involved in the delivery of the operational programmes	x	x	x
Organisations not directly involved in the implementation of the operational programmes	x	x	x
Academic and research bodies involved the field of employment and mobility	x	x	x
Organisations representing employers	x	x	x
General public		x	

### 3.2. Specific consultations/activities

#### 3.2.1. The public consultation

##### 3.2.1.1. Description of the activity

The online public consultation ran from 14 October 2019 to 6 January 2020 and took the form of a survey. The questionnaire comprised four strands of questions (excluding profiling and closing sections), structured around the main evaluation questions and including both open-ended and closed questions. Each strand was customised to one specific group of respondents.

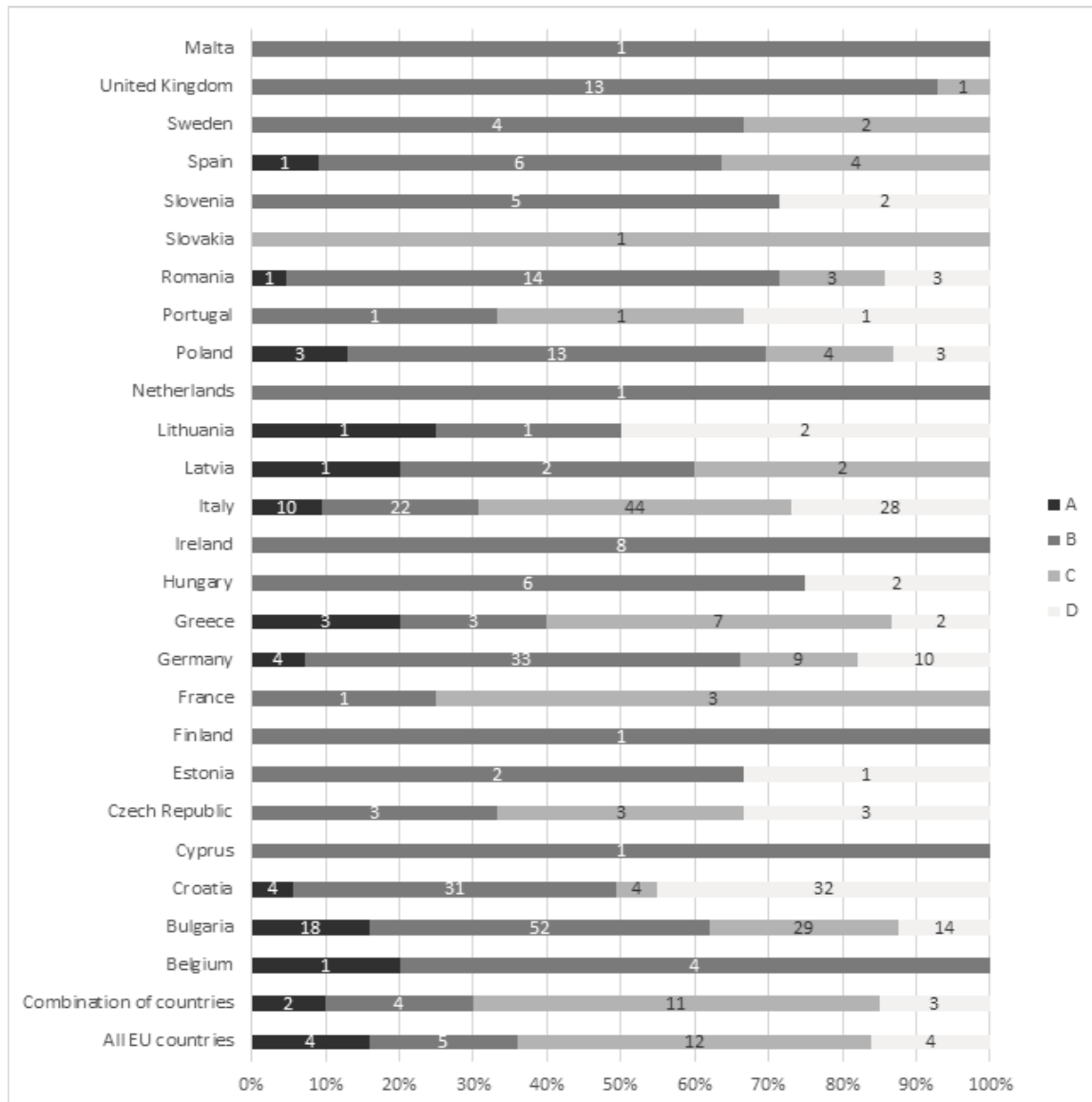
##### 3.2.1.2. Stakeholders

The public consultation had a separate section for each of the following groups of respondents:

- Group A: EU citizens who have benefited or are benefiting from ESF support (“ESF participants”);
- Group B: organisations that are or were involved in ESF and/or received support (i.e. managing authorities, intermediate bodies, beneficiaries, and social partners) that supposedly have a direct and detailed knowledge of ESF, although to varying degrees, depending on their specific function/role in the ESF (‘organisations involved’);
- Group C: EU citizens who did not benefit from ESF support (‘other citizens’);
- Group D: organisations not involved in ESF and organisations that did not declare their status or responded ‘I don’t know’ to the question ‘Have you been involved in or have you benefited from actions promoting employment and labour mobility supported by the European Social Fund?’ (‘organisations not involved’).



**Figure 1: Breakdown of respondents by MS and group – T08**



Source: Final report of the public consultation on the evaluation of the EU support to employment and labour mobility

The public consultation received **541 responses**. There was an **unbalanced geographical distribution** with four countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany and Italy) responsible for around 60% of responses received. Almost 60% of the 541 respondents were women and around 40% men. Of the 541 respondents, 53 (9.8%) were from Group A (ESF participants); 238 (43.9%) were from Group B (organisations involved); 140 (25.9%) were from Group C (other citizens) and 110 (20.4%) were from Group D (organisations not involved). Of this Group D, 79 organisations declared they were not involved in ESF. The remaining 31 either did not answer the relevant question or said they did not know. Therefore, almost half of the public consultation respondents were organisations that are or were involved in ESF and/or received support. However, relatively few ESF participants responded to the public consultation. Figure 1 above summarises the respondents by country of reference and group.

### 3.2.2. Member State level interviews and focus groups

The fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews in all Member States and case studies in 10 Member States, covering 20 operational programmes and all TO8 investment priorities (except youth employment).

Four focus groups were held in addition to the EU-level focus group. The types of stakeholders consulted were managing authorities, beneficiaries, socioeconomic partners and evaluators/researchers. The interviews and case studies were used as the main source of information to answer the evaluation questions and feed into case study reports.

#### 3.2.2.1. EU level validation focus group

The EU-level focus group took place on 3 February 2020 in Brussels. It aimed to discuss key issues in some of the evaluation questions with a group of experts involved in European-level policy debates on employment related matters and labour mobility, as well as with representatives of managing authorities. Nineteen (19) representatives participated. Discussions were facilitated by five consultants supplied by the contractor.

### 3.3. Overview of results of consultation activities

#### 3.3.1. Effectiveness

For respondents that received ESF support, the most common benefit related to **improvement of the quality of the labour market position** and **help in looking for a job** (approximately one in five mentioned each of these), whereas very few said it helped with achieving a better work-life balance and entering or going back to education and training. Respondents were also asked about their **current and past labour market situation**. Before ESF support, 41.5% of 53 responding ESF participants were employed and after ESF support the employment rate rose to 84.9%. Likewise, 20.8% were unemployed before support and 7.5% after support.

Overall, most participating organisations agreed that **ESF operations were effective in achieving TO8 objectives**, in particular: i) in **promoting access to employment** for jobseekers and inactive people (89.9% of the 238 respondents agreed); ii) promoting self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation (81.1%); and promoting equality between men and women (77.3%).

The objectives that were the least mentioned as being effective were the promoting work-life balance and active and healthy ageing.

For **helping jobseekers and inactive people enter the labour market**, most respondents mentioned **training** and **support in finding a job** as the most effective actions. On support to **self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation**, organisations mostly indicated **financial support/microcredit**. To support gender equality in the labour market, organisations considered **flexible work arrangements** and **access to quality childcare** to be the most successful actions, whereas less than half of them considered training, gender mainstreaming and awareness campaigns to be successful. To promoting active and healthy ageing, **flexible work arrangements and health and safety at the workplace** were identified as effective, although the number of respondents not knowing/not answering is particularly high.

Respondents consider **career guidance and vocational training** of individuals as most successful measure to help workers and companies adapt to change, whereas awareness raising campaigns were mentioned by less than a quarter of them. On the promotion of employment support systems, **strengthening cooperation** between labour market institutions and stakeholders, **improvement of public employment services**, and **training of staff** were considered to be the most successful measures by the highest proportion of respondents, whereas performance management and transnational partnership were mentioned least. Finally, on the promotion of geographic and occupational mobility of workers, organisations considered **language training, recognition of qualifications and validation of competences and acquired skills** as successful.

On effective support to target groups, the majority of responding organisations believe that ESF is successful in supporting **job seekers** and **inactive people** (77.6% of the 348 respondents agreed or strongly agreed), and **long-term unemployed** (64.7% agreed). More than half also believe that ESF effectively supports people leaving education without a qualification (58%), and people at risk of social exclusion (56.5%). They seem to be more sceptical about ESF ability to support migrants or individuals with a foreign background (less than half of respondents believe ESF was successful in supporting them: 49.2% out of 348 respondents) or people in remote areas (48.9%). Regarding people affected by poverty and homeless people, a number of respondents said they did not know (33.4% and 46.1% respectively). Considering this, the assessment seems to be particularly negative about the ESF's effectiveness in reaching homeless **people** with 36.6% saying it did not reach them vs 17.4% saying it did). Respondents referring to Italy and Croatia tended to give a less positive assessment of the success of ESF in addressing different target groups compared to the other countries.

Overall, most respondents seem to consider **social media campaigns** as the best channel of information (70.4% of 541 the respondents), followed by information and awareness raising events (44.5%). The least popular channels seem to be the distribution of flyers and advertisements in newspapers. Most respondents said they learnt about the support measures they benefited from through employment services and employment info centres (43.4%), and less than a fifth through social media.

Regarding potential hindering factors for individuals, **information and ability to reach out to potential participants** seemed to be the main factors. In fact, individual respondents who did not take part in ESF support mostly said that **they were not aware of it**, followed by respondents saying **they did not know where to ask for information**.

The focus groups discussions highlighted the fact that the ESF may not be very visible to the public, as it is **hard to 'show' the contribution of ESF** given that it has an essentially human dimension, as opposed to, the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund for instance, which deal with infrastructure.

Organisations were also asked about factors that may hinder the implementation of actions and approximately three quarters of them pointed to **administrative burden for beneficiaries** (76% of the 238 respondents) and **managing authorities**. External factors, such as **structural problems** (i.e. lack employment opportunities and low education and skills level of participants) are also considered to play an important role (by 71.3%). Some organisations specified the types

of obstacles they have encountered in a related open question. A total of 33 responses indicated cumbersome bureaucracy and lengthy procedures as the significant factors hampering the effectiveness of ESF procedures, which supports the responses given in the closed question. In addition, nine respondents mentioned that targets and measures are not carefully tailored to needs, especially when it comes to people facing multiple barriers and discrimination. In the EU-level focus groups, it was highlighted that both managing authorities and beneficiaries continue to face a high administrative burden (because of both the ESF and CPR Regulations and the so called 'gold plating' of rules at national level). This is particularly limiting for smaller beneficiaries (e.g. NGOs representing vulnerable individuals) and discourages them to access to ESF funds. Issues with inter-institutional cooperation were also highlighted especially in the case of integrated pathways.

Regarding **success factors**, more than nine in ten responding organisations agreed that **personalised services and opportunities** help promote participation (95.3% out the 238 respondents), followed by services that are in line with labour market needs (92.7%), flexibility of duration (92.1%), flexibility in the way actions are implemented (91.5%) and financial benefits for participants (89%).

In a related open question, 12 of the 40 that responded mentioned the importance of **creating partnerships**, believing that they help bringing together different experiences to help design meaningful solutions that address different needs, as well as **tailored and holistic approaches to support end users**. Ten respondents also mentioned the quality of staff and dedication of grant recipients and delivery partners.

The focus groups participants considered that the **net effect** of different measures, should not to be judged by the seemingly low employment rates after the end of support, as this might not reflect the strong net effects for individuals who are further away from the labour market. A discussion on **target groups** highlighted the importance of tailored approaches, focusing too much on target groups may cause certain individuals to be overlooked, notably those that do not fit under pre-defined categories but are nonetheless in need of support.

Regarding employers, it was mentioned that it could be difficult to get employers to use **financial incentives** unless they are **aligned to the actual labour market needs**.

It was also mentioned that 'standard' employment measures pose fewer obstacles to implementation and that 'newer' types of measures might take more time to implement.

The importance of **integrating the support process** between regional and national level public employment services was mentioned as an important ingredient. Regional and national level public employment services sometimes serve the same clients, but refrain from sharing detailed information to avoid the risk of duplication.

### 3.3.2. *Efficiency*

Most respondents consider **training and education** to be a cost-efficient measure (77.4% of the 541 respondents), followed by **basic skills training and incentives for employers** (73.6%). Open suggestions to improve efficiency point include **reducing bureaucracy and simplifying procedures** to reduce the cost of operations, increasing the **flexibility of budget** and

procedures, and **involvement of final beneficiaries** earlier and more deeply in the design of the measures.

Administrative arrangements can have a bearing on the efficiency of operations and organisations were asked their opinion on them. Approximately two-thirds considered the **communication** arrangements appropriate. A smaller share (50%-60%), considered the evaluation and project selection procedures, the application of simplified cost options, project implementation and the reporting and monitoring arrangements to be appropriate. Some respondents declined to answer ranged (12.9% on reporting and monitoring and 24.6% on audit) on reporting and monitoring in particular, there seems to be room for improvement since 33.8% of the 348 respondents said they were burdensome or insufficient.

Opinions on the **audit and management and control system** arrangements were even more negative. Less than half of the respondents considered them to be appropriate. However, **organisations involved in ESF** – which arguable have a more informed opinion – were more likely to consider the arrangements appropriate. Among these organisations, the highest share of respondents saying that **arrangements were burdensome** were referring to for the **management and control system** and **reporting and monitoring** (38.7% and 31.1% of the 238 respondents respectively). Among the four countries with the higher response rates, respondents referring to Germany and Italy seem to be relatively more negative about the management and control system compared to those in Croatia and Bulgaria and in general the rest of respondents.

### 3.3.3. *Relevance*

Overall, respondents rated the usefulness of the various actions positively. In particular, almost 90% considered that actions to **place a person in a job** to be useful (88.9% out of the 541 respondents). Actions aimed at increasing the human capital strengthen the workforce (improving the **quality and welfare of human resources in companies and organisations**, and helping a **person perform better in an existing job**) were deemed useful, by approximately 80% of the respondents. Actions promoting organisational change and increasing equality between men and women received a less favourable assessment, 17% and 19.2% respectively said that they have little or no usefulness. Organisations involved in ESF and ESF participants seem to have a slightly more positive opinion on the usefulness of these actions. In addition, all actions were generally considered to be useful by most respondents in the different countries. When asked about additional useful actions, respondents mentioned further enhancing the VET systems and improving training modules, developing better targeting mechanisms, and, a more coherent EU-wide qualification scheme.

Approximately 70% of the 348 responding organisations believe that the **ESF was able to adapt** to the evolving socio-economic conditions and participants' needs. A higher proportion of positive responses was received for Italy and Bulgaria and a lower proportion for Croatia and Germany. A few respondents indicated that the ESF was flexible in terms of adjusting targets and adapting to the changing needs of the target groups and less flexible in terms of excessive procedures and requirements and cumbersome bureaucracy.

According to focus groups discussions, three types of support (not necessarily limited to ESF support) can be useful for labour mobility: namely support for:

- The system and the network, including cross-cutting activities at EU-level, technical systems for information sharing, etc.
- Service providers, to support activities such as recruitment, outreach activities, information to employers, matching CVs with jobs, etc.
- Individuals and employers, for example regarding relocation, recognition of competences, language trainings or the creation of a 'welcome package'.

Focus group members also made the point that the ESF's support **to labour mobility through ESF seems limited**. Although some countries use ESF funds for the EURES<sup>122</sup> network, the network is mainly supported through EaSI<sup>123</sup> funds. The fact that ESF has traditionally had a national focus also means that a somewhat lower level of attention has been paid to cross-border activities.

It was suggested that it could be useful to encourage '**return mobility**' and get workers to move back to their country of origin with the new skills they acquired abroad. It was noted that **third country nationals** have the same needs (in terms of language for example), so the same services could be provided to all. However, funding streams are often separate for EU and third country nationals, and more synergies could be exploited

#### 3.3.4. Coherence

In this section, respondents often answered that they did not know or did not have an opinion. For example when asked about the ESF's coherence with existing national and regional programmes, 40.8% and 72.7% of the 541 respondents respectively did not have an opinion). Respondents were slightly more likely to have an opinion on the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, but less than half of them (45.1%) considered the ERDF to be complementary with the ESF, with 41.3% saying they did not know and only 8.9% saying that they were not aligned.

**Focus groups participants considered that the coherence and complementarity of ESF's TO8 with other funds had improved**, particularly with the Youth Employment Initiative, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) (where the ESF plays a 'preventive' action and the EGF a 'corrective' one), and the AMIF and also vis à vis labour mobility. They also mentioned high complementarity between the thematic objectives and synergy with the European semester cycle of economic policy coordination and particularly the country-specific recommendations. However, they also reported difficulties in the concrete integration of funds.

#### 3.3.5 EU added value

Approximately half (47.7% out of the 541 respondents) believed that funding provided by the ESF would not otherwise have been available (the volume effect). A further 28.5% said that

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<sup>122</sup> For more info on EURES check the home page at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eures/public/en/homepage>

<sup>123</sup> EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). More information is available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eip/ageing/funding/EaSI\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/ageing/funding/EaSI_en)

without EU support there would be less attention paid to unemployed people (the scope effect). Finally 10.2% stated that ESF support does not make a difference (to national programmes) and the rest (11.3%) said they didn't know.

Similarly, most respondents believe that there is an 'EU value added' aspect to ESF TO8 support to labour mobility. Just above 40 per cent (42.9% of the 541 respondents) believe that is because **there would be not enough money to pay for such actions**, and the rest (27.7%) said that without EU support there would be less or no attention paid to unemployed people. Finally 11.6% stated that ESF support does not make a difference and 16.3% did not know.

Unsurprisingly, in both cases, organisations and individuals that do not have first-hand experience with the ESF were more likely to respond that they did not know or that ESF did not make a difference.

Participants in the EU-level focus groups agreed that TO8 support has brought about **clear EU added value** in terms of:

- providing additional resources;
- covering new target groups;
- creating opportunities to test innovative projects and upscale them (provided there's sufficient innovation readiness);
- spreading good 'policies' across countries and steering attention to key challenges also through country specific recommendations;
- strengthening partnerships, including private public partnerships;
- increased attention to social innovation and social entrepreneurship: ESF helps to tailor the approaches, and test mechanisms and roll out successful methods;
- increased inter-institutional cooperation.

#### 4. THEMATIC OBJECTIVE TO9 – SOCIAL INCLUSION

##### 4.1. The consultation strategy

###### 4.1.1. Roadmap

The evaluation roadmap was published on the Commission's 'Have your Say' portal and made available for public feedback between 19 December 2018 and 16 January 2019<sup>124</sup>. Six contributions were received. Two were anonymous and four came from organisations (ENSIE, FEANTSA, EuroHealthNet, and the European Microfinance Network). They expressed support for the evaluation but did not suggest changes to the roadmap.

###### 4.1.2. Consultation stakeholders

The following individuals and groups were consulted:

- (1) **Participants:** individuals supported by the European Social Fund operations were consulted to obtain a direct insight into: (i) the extent to which their own objectives

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<sup>124</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/2030-Evaluation-of-the-support-to-social-inclusion-by-the-European-Social-Fund>

- for participation have been achieved; and (ii) success factors that could not be directly identified through the monitoring mechanisms.
- (2) **Potential participants:** individuals that did not received ESF support but who according to the ESF regulation might have qualified were consulted to obtain a direct insight into the reasons for their non-participation.
  - (3) **Beneficiaries** are the ultimate recipients of funds. They cover organisations actually delivering ESF support to participants and organisations using ESF support to enhance access to affordable, sustainable and high quality services of general interest, in particular in the fields of health care, employment and training services, services for the homeless, out of school care, child care and long-term care services. They were consulted to obtain a direct insight into: (i) the extent to which their own objectives for participation have been achieved; and (ii) success factors and barriers that could not be directly identified through the monitoring mechanisms.
  - (4) **Potential beneficiaries** are organisations that could have benefited from ESF support but did not. They were consulted to obtain a direct insight into the reasons for their non-participation.
  - (5) **Organisations or institutions involved in the management** of the operational programmes such as: Member States, managing authorities, intermediate bodies, organisations or institutions sitting on the monitoring committees.
  - (6) **Organisations not directly involved** but that represent the people targeted by the ESF - more specifically those at risk of social exclusion, poverty and discrimination - who can therefore provide a broader view of the needs and issues at stake with recipients and potential recipients.
  - (7) **Social partners** who could give feedback on important success factors;.
  - (8) **Academic and research bodies** involved in the area of social exclusion, poverty and discrimination - including the access to affordable, sustainable and high quality services of general interest – that could provide insights into the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence or sustainability of measures.
  - (9) **General public:** any individual or organisation that could provide useful views on how the ESF can social inclusion, and combat poverty and any discrimination (thematic objective TO9).

#### 4.1.3. *Consultation methods and tools*

To reach adequately these stakeholders, a range of consultation activities and methods were used, namely: a **public consultation, targeted consultations** (including interviews with EU and national level stakeholders, case studies of 19 Operational Programmes in 11 countries<sup>125</sup> which also included in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, **focus groups** in each case study Member State, and a **Delphi survey** to validate the evaluation's draft findings with selected experts.

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<sup>125</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Sweden



**Table 2: Overview of the stakeholders reached through each consultation tool/method**

Type of stakeholder	Targeted interviews (EU and national level)	Targeted interviews (case studies)	Public consultation	Focus groups	Delphi Survey
Participants			X		
Potential participants			X		
Beneficiaries	X	X	X	X	X
Potential beneficiaries			X		X
Managing authorities	X	X	X	X	X
Organisations or institutions involved in the management of the operational programmes	X	X	X	X	
Organisations not directly involved in the implementation of the operations	X	X	X		X
Social partners	X		X		
Academic and research bodies	X		X		
General public			X		

The consultation methods were implemented, in line with the agreed consultation strategy. The only major deviation was that the focus group planned in Italy could not be held because it coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead an EU-level Delphi survey with selected experts was organised to validate the draft findings and to gather their views on two issues that came out from the field work, (i) the documentation of “soft-outcomes” and (ii) the access to EU-funds for small, local organisations.

#### **4.2. Specific consultations/activities**

##### *4.2.1. The public consultation*

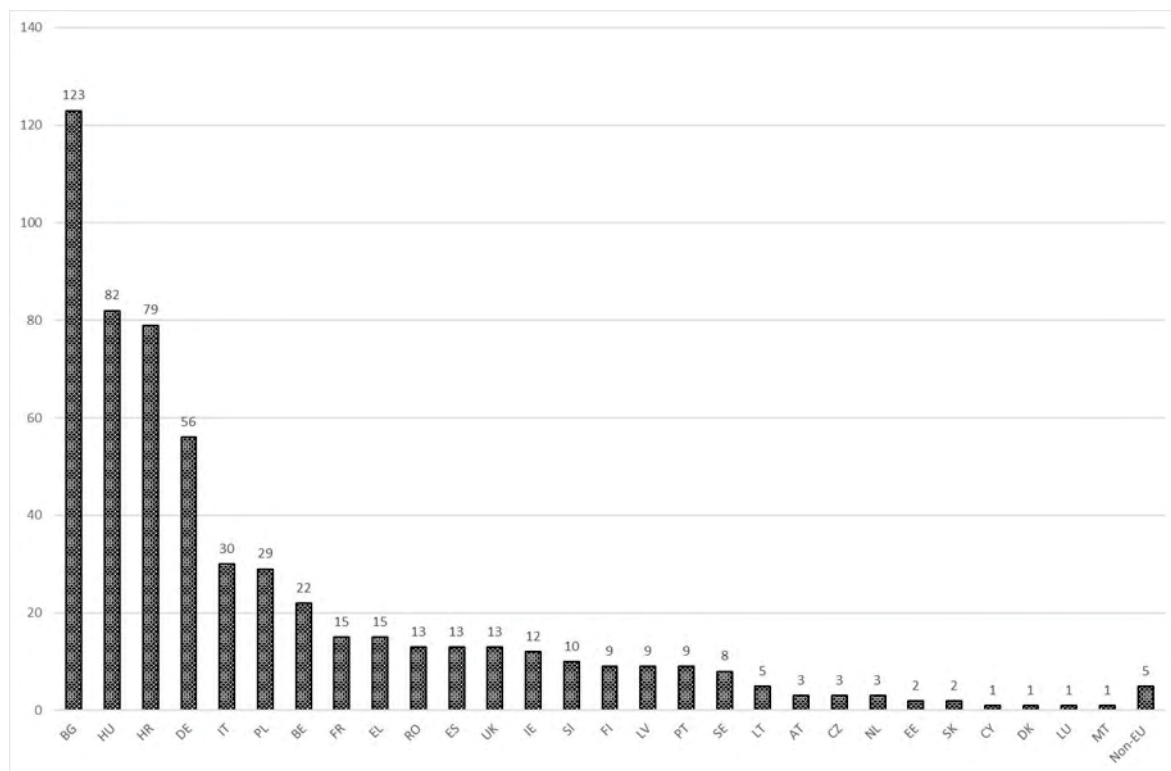
###### 4.2.1.1. Description of the activity

The online public consultation ran from 26 September 2019 to 19 December 2019 and took form of a survey. The questionnaire comprised six strands of questions (excluding profiling and closing sections), structured around the main evaluation questions and including both open-ended and closed questions. Each strand was customised to one specific group of respondents.

###### 4.2.1.2. Stakeholders

A total of 574 individuals and groups responded. Bulgaria was the Member State with the highest number of responses (123 representing 21.4% of the total), followed Hungary (82 responses- 14.3% of the total), and Croatia (79 responses= 13.8% of the total) from. Importantly, responses were received from all 28 EU Member States. Five of the 574 respondents came from outside the EU.

**Figure 2: Number of respondents to the public consultation for ESF support to social inclusion by Member State.**



Source: TO9 supporting study report Annex 7

The public consultation had a separate section for each of the following six groups of respondents:

- Strand I: organisations with no knowledge of or involvement in ESF TO9;
- Strand II: organisations with knowledge of ESF TO9 but not involved in its delivery: e.g. NGOs and think-tanks;
- Strand III: organisations involved in the delivery of ESF TO9: e.g. Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies, beneficiary organisations or project promoters;
- Strand IV: individuals who have received ESF TO9 support;
- Strand V: individuals who have not received ESF TO9 support but who have knowledge of it: e.g. academic experts;
- Strand VI: individuals with no knowledge of or involvement in ESF TO9.

Both individual respondents and those responding on behalf of organisations were directed to **specific strands of questions corresponding to their level of knowledge or involvement with ESF**. The number of questions varied by strand. See Table 3 below for the number and proportion of respondents by group.

**Table 3: Number of respondents by group**

Strand	No. of responses	%
Strand I: Organisations not aware of ESF	10	1.7%
Strand II: Organisations aware of ESF but not playing a direct role in the	59	10.3%

Strand	No. of responses	%
delivery		
Strand III: Organisations directly involved in the delivery of ESF	295	51.4%
Strand IV: Individuals having received ESF support	38	6.6%
Strand V: Individuals aware of the ESF but not having received support	132	23.0%
Strand VI: Individuals not aware of the ESF and not having received support	40	7.0%
Total	574	100%

Looking at the **type of respondent**, the 574 responses were split unevenly between organisations (364 responses or 63% of the total) and citizens (210 responses or 37%). Of the organisations, the most responses came from public authorities (168), followed by NGOs (70). All respondents, except two, identified as EU citizens. More than 60% identified as female and more than 80% were aged between 25 and 54 years old.

Of the 574 respondents, **more than half responded on behalf of organisations that are directly involved in ESF** (295 or 51.4%). Of the individual respondents, the biggest group was those aware of ESF but not having received ESF support (132 or 23%).

More than a third (136 out of 364) of those **responding on behalf of organisations** work in **large organisations** (with 250 employees or more) that predominantly specialise in the **labour market and social inclusion** area, of which just over 40% were involved in the management of EU funds. On their involvement in ESF delivery, 41.9% (152 out of 364) identified as beneficiaries, having received ESF funding for projects. A total of 110 responses (30.3%) were submitted on behalf of Managing Authorities or Intermediate Bodies. Only a few of the 364 respondents (30 or 8.3%) in the 'organisations' strand indicated that they did not play a no role in ESF delivery.

Turning to **individual respondents'** experience or involvement with the ESF, nearly three quarters of 210 respondents said that they had never received ESF support; i.e. had never taken part in an ESF activity. 33 said they had recently received ESF support and only 5 said that they are currently receiving ESF support. These results appear to coincide with the answers on socio-economic status in that nearly three-quarters of individuals (155 out of 210 or 73.8%) say they are employed full-time, and ESF social inclusion activities tend to target the unemployed or the irregularly in employed.

A total of 25 respondents also attached a position paper.

#### 4.2.2. Targeted interviews with stakeholders

A total of 141 interviews were carried out with EU and national level stakeholders, covering all Member States. The types of stakeholders consulted included managing authorities, beneficiaries, socioeconomic partners, evaluators/researchers and representatives of participants.

#### 4.2.3. Case studies

Twenty (20) operational programmes (OPs) in 11 Member States were selected for case study. Within these 20 OPs, country experts - in consultation with the Managing Authorities -

identified a total of 62 projects that could be appropriate for an in-depth analysis. However, one of the OPs was dropped from the list as an interview could not be organised with the Managing Authority. Focus groups were held in each of these Member States except Italy due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

OPs and projects were selected on the basis of criteria agreed with Commission during the inception phase as well as consultations with the Commission and the Managing Authorities.

The interviews and case studies were the main source of information to answer the evaluation questions. They also fed into case study reports.

#### 4.2.4. Policy Delphi validation process

Instead of an eleventh focus group, a Delphi survey was conducted between 9 April 2020 and 13 May 2020. It aimed to gather a range of perspectives from experts involved in EU-level policy debates on social inclusion, poverty and discrimination as well as from managing authorities not consulted in the previous stages, one auditor and social partners. Invitations were sent to representatives of 15 organisations of which a total of 10 participated in at least one round. These were:

- Solidar
- A Belgian ESF managing authority
- National Audit Union of Social Cooperatives – Poland
- European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network
- Inclusion Europe
- European Disability Forum (EDF)
- EuroHealthNet
- ENISE
- ESN
- European Network on Independent Living

### 4.3. Overview of results of consultation activities

#### 4.3.1. Effectiveness

Overall, the vast majority of respondents from Strands II, III and V (80% of the 486) believe that **all ESF actions are either very useful or mostly useful**. The most useful actions (>80%) are:

- basic skills training (e.g. social skills, IT, language) (90% or 438 respondents);
- training and education (including vocational training) (89% or 433);
- support to people with disabilities (e.g. promotion of community-based care) (86% or 419);
- support to overcome barriers to job search actions (e.g. transport or childcare) (85% or, 413);
- information, guidance, tutoring in the search for a job (85% or 412).

The organisations involved in the actual delivery (295 respondents) deemed that the most successful actions related to the following target groups:

- Persons having a disability (61% or 180);
- Unemployed for 12 months or more (60% or 178);

- Unemployed for less than 12 months (59% or 174); and
- Low-skilled (57% or 168).

Most respondents said that these actions brought about job-related changes for participants, improved their soft skills and self-confidence, and increased awareness of social inclusion poverty and discrimination. Partnerships between managing authorities and NGOs and targeted or individualised support are some of the main factors identified as contributing to the success of ESF actions. Nearly all the respondents that had received ESF support said that their expectations from participating in ESF activities had been partially or fully met. The most frequently expectations were obtaining better job conditions, finding a job or being actively included in society.

#### *4.3.2. Efficiency*

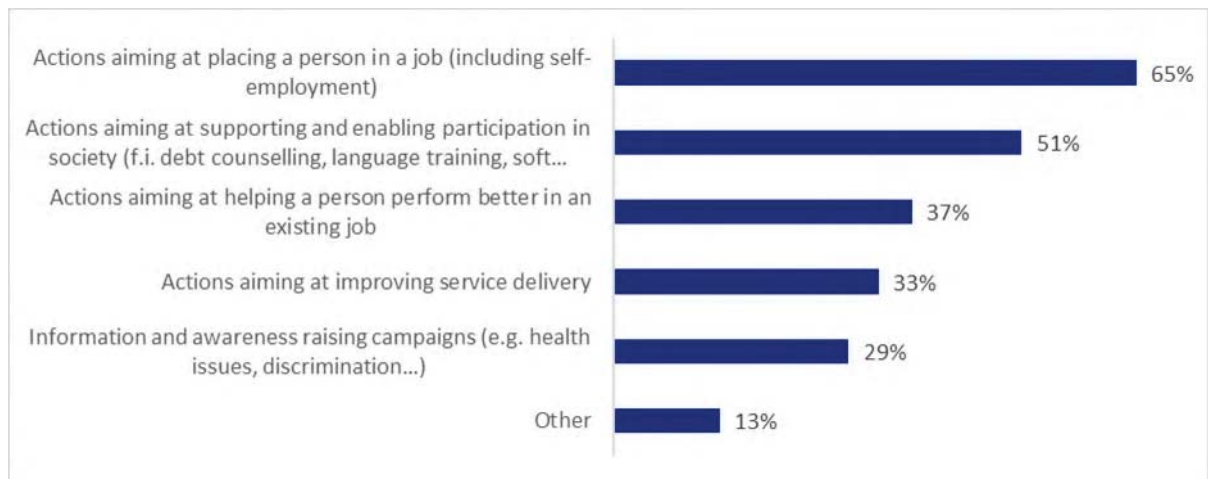
The efficiency question was only put to the Strand II and III respondents. Most (48-80% of the 354 answers) said that **the various ESF activities are cost-effective** (the resources invested are proportionate to the results achieved), in particular: basic skills training; training and education; information, guidance and tutoring in the search for a job; and internships and traineeships to learn a trade. The only action deemed inefficient by a majority of respondents was 'studies and evaluations of institutions'.

Most organisations involved in the delivery of the ESF indicate direct, practical and individualised support as the most cost-effective, followed by flexible and multidimensional support, and support for integration to employment. The factors identified as contributing to inefficiency, included the so-called 'creaming' effects (i.e. projects focusing on achieving set targets rather than on real social change), and the standardisation and rigidity of ESF delivery structures and timeframes.

#### *4.3.3. Relevance*

Most respondents agreed that the EU should be involved in promoting social inclusion and in combating poverty and all kinds of discrimination.

**Figure 3: What kind of support is provided with ESF funding to promote social inclusion, combat poverty and any discrimination? Answers by strand III respondents.**



N= 295 Source: TO9 supporting study report Annex 7

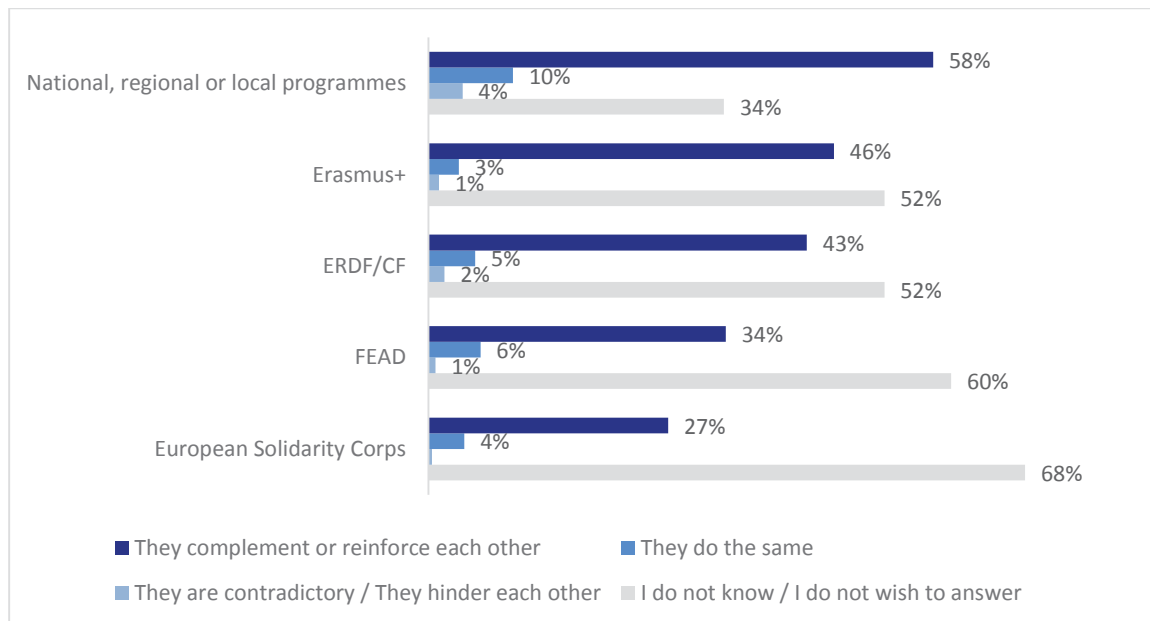
ESF actions to get people into employment were deemed relevant by the highest proportion of respondents, regardless of their knowledge of or experience with ESF. Two-thirds of those that had received ESF support mentioned having participated in ESF training and education actions or had received information and guidance when searching for a job. Of those who answered on behalf of organisations directly involved in ESF delivery, most (51% of the 295) said that their support is directed at people who have been unemployed for 12 months or more. Many, (42% of the 295) said it was also directed at people with a disability.

The review of position papers suggests that the ESF’s Thematic Objective 9 is still generally considered to be appropriate, as it supports actions related to social inclusion and anti-discrimination, which are as relevant today as they were in 2014.

#### 4.3.4. Coherence

Overall, the ESF actions that promote social inclusion, combat poverty or discrimination were considered to be coherent with other schemes, in particular with national, regional or local programmes.

**Figure 4: In your opinion to what extent are ESF actions promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination coherent with other schemes? Respondent strands II, III and V**



N=486 Source: TO9 supporting study report Annex 7

Regarding EU schemes, Erasmus+ was most frequently identified as complementing and reinforcing ESF actions promoting social inclusion or combating poverty and discrimination. A trend noticeable in the review of position papers is that there will be scope under ESF+ to further strengthen coherence with the European Pillar of Social Rights (on access to education and sustainable employment) and with Interreg (on social innovation).

#### 4.3.5. EU added value

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that one of the advantages of EU interventions to promote social inclusion, combat poverty and discrimination is that they can achieve more could be done than national or local resources only. More than half of the respondents also thought that ESF measures allow new social issues to be covered and new social services to be tested. Very few respondents thought that ESF or even EU-supported interventions make no difference in promoting social inclusion or combating poverty and discrimination.

**Table 4: In your view, what would be the advantage of having European Union interventions? (broken down by Strand III respondents' role in ESF delivery)**

	Beneficiary org. receiving ESF funding (N=152)	MA / IB (N=109)	Member of an ESF Monitoring Committee (N=18)	EU funds Coordinating body (N=12)	Certifying or Audit Authority (N=4)
More could be done than with national or local resources only	88%	84%	94%	50%	100%
New issues could be covered	55%	62%	78%	58%	75%
New ways of delivering services could be tested	57%	58%	61%	33%	50%
None. I do not think it would really make a difference	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Other	3%	2%	6%	0%	0%
I do not wish to answer / I do not know	2%	6%	0%	17%	0%

N=295. Source: PC results; multiple answers possible.

#### 4.3.6. Overall conclusion

The public consultation suggests that ESF support for TO9 is rated positively value by a wide range of stakeholders – both individuals and organisations that are not fully aware of the ESF and those who actively involved in its delivery. ESF actions are generally considered to be effective and to offer value for money that could not be achieved with national or local resources only. However, some replies highlight areas of concern and of potential improvements, including 'creaming' effects that hinder the efficiency of actions and the scope for greater coherence with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## 5. THEMATIC OBJECTIVE TO10 – EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### 5.1. The consultation strategy

#### 5.1.1. Roadmap

The evaluation roadmap was published on the Commission's 'Have your Say' portal and made available for public feedback between 21 December 2018 and 18 January 2019. Six replies were received of which 3 were anonymous. The other three were from the organisations: ENSIE (European Network of Social Integration Enterprises), Masaryk University (Czechia) and EAPN Nederland (Non-governmental organisation). They expressed support for the evaluation but did not suggest changes to the roadmap.

#### 5.1.2. Consultation stakeholders

The following groups were consulted:



- (1) **Participants:** individuals supported by the European Social Fund operations were consulted to obtain a direct insight into: (i) the extent to which their own objectives for participation have been achieved; and (ii) success factors that could not be directly identified through the monitoring mechanisms.
- (2) **Potential participants:** individuals who did not received ESF support but who according to the ESF regulation might have qualified were consulted to obtain a direct insight into the reasons for their non-participation;
- (3) **Beneficiaries** are the ultimate; and (ii) the success factors and barriers that could not be directly identified through the monitoring mechanisms.;
- (4) **Potential beneficiaries** are organisations that could have benefited from ESF support but did not. They were consulted to obtain a direct insight into the reasons for their non-participation;
- (5) **Organisations or institutions involved in the management** of the operational programmes such as: Member States, managing authorities, intermediate bodies, organisations or institutions sitting on the monitoring committees (see Table 1, rows 5 to 9)
- (6) **Organisations not directly involved in the implementation** of the operations but that represent the people targeted by the ESF - more specifically those in education and training - and could therefore provide a broader view of the needs and issues faced by the recipients and potential recipients.
- (7) **Social partners** who could give feedback regarding important success factors.
- (8) **Academic and research bodies** involved in the area of education and training that could provide insights as to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence or sustainability of measures.
- (9) **General public:** any individual or organisation that could provide useful views on how the ESF can support education and training.

### 5.1.3. Consultation methods and tools

To adequately reach these stakeholders, a range of consultation methods were used, namely: a **public consultation, targeted consultations** (including interviews with EU and national level stakeholders, case studies of 20 Operational Programmes in 12 countries<sup>126</sup> which also included in-depth interviews with key stakeholders ), and a **policy Delphi validation** process on the evaluation's draft findings. The supporting study made use of a meta-analysis of six pre-existing national ESF participant surveys<sup>127</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> Poland, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Czechia, Romania, Lithuania, Ireland and Slovenia

<sup>127</sup> Six specific ESF participant and beneficiary surveys on TO10 from six Member States (Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Lithuania and the UK).

**Table 5: Overview of the stakeholders reached through each consultation tool/method**

Type of stakeholder	Targeted interviews (EU and national level)	Targeted interviews (case studies)	Public consultation	Policy Delphi validation process
Participants			X	
Potential participants			X	
Beneficiaries	X	X	X	X
Potential beneficiaries			X	X
Managing authorities	X	X	X	X
National and regional education ministries and VET institutions	X	X	X	X
National and regional labour and employment ministries and institutions	X	X	X	
European institutions involved in ESF or related education and training policy development	X			X
Other relevant national, regional and European bodies responsible for management / implementation or match funding of education, training or employment funds	X	X	X	X
Organisations not directly involved in implementation/ associations representing those in education or training	X		X	X
Social and economic partners at national and EU level	X		X	X
Research and academic organisations	X		X	X
General public			X	

The consultation methods were implemented in line with the agreed consultation strategy. There were some challenges in securing all the interviews for the targeted consultation as some EU-level stakeholders declined to participate due to limited or no knowledge on ESF or were non-responsive despite reminders. The impact of this on the consultation strategy was minimal, however, as the targeted consultations allowed the in-depth views of key stakeholders to be gathered.

## 5.2. Specific consultations/activities

### 5.2.1. Public Consultation

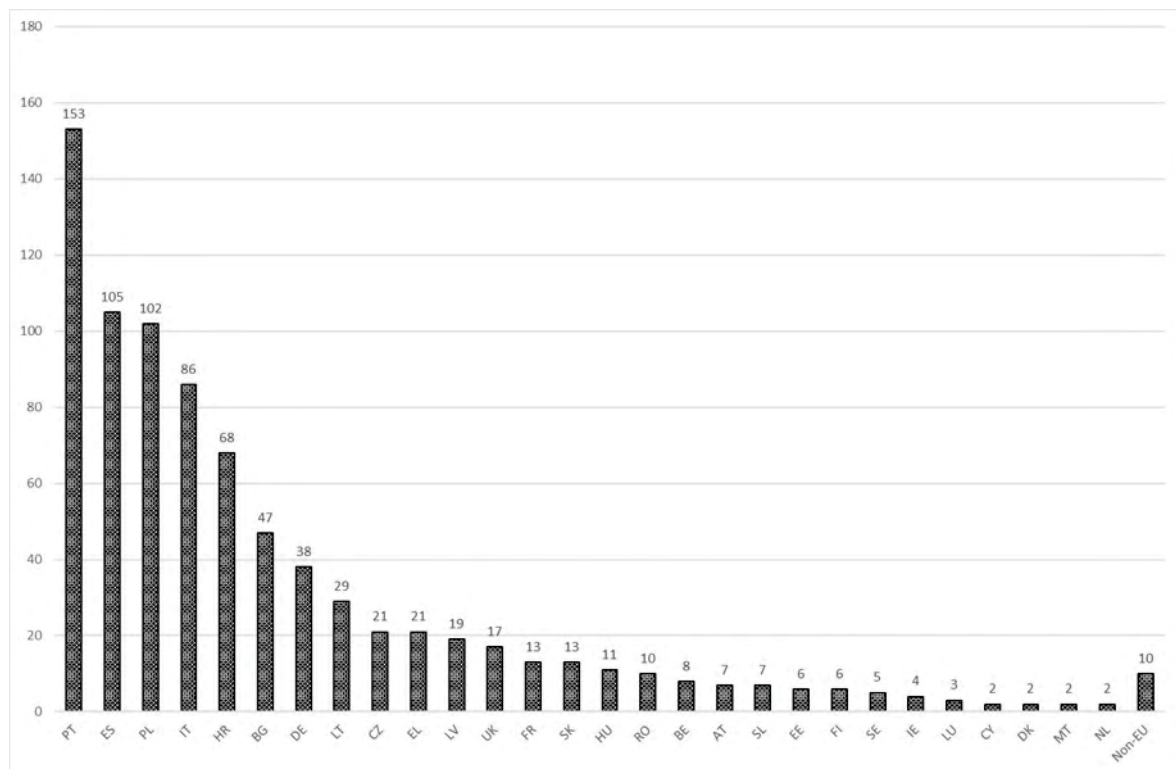
#### 5.2.1.1. Description of the activity

The **public consultation** ran for 14 weeks and took the form of an online survey. The questionnaire included both closed and open questions, addressing the key evaluation criteria, and was tailored to the different stakeholder groups using a routing system.

#### 5.2.1.2. Stakeholders

A total of 817 individuals and groups responded to the public consultation. The **geographical distribution** was somewhat **unbalanced** with most responses (153) coming from Portugal, followed by Spain (105), Poland (102), Italy (86) and Croatia (68). All other countries had fewer than 60 respondents as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Number of respondents by country of origin – TO10**



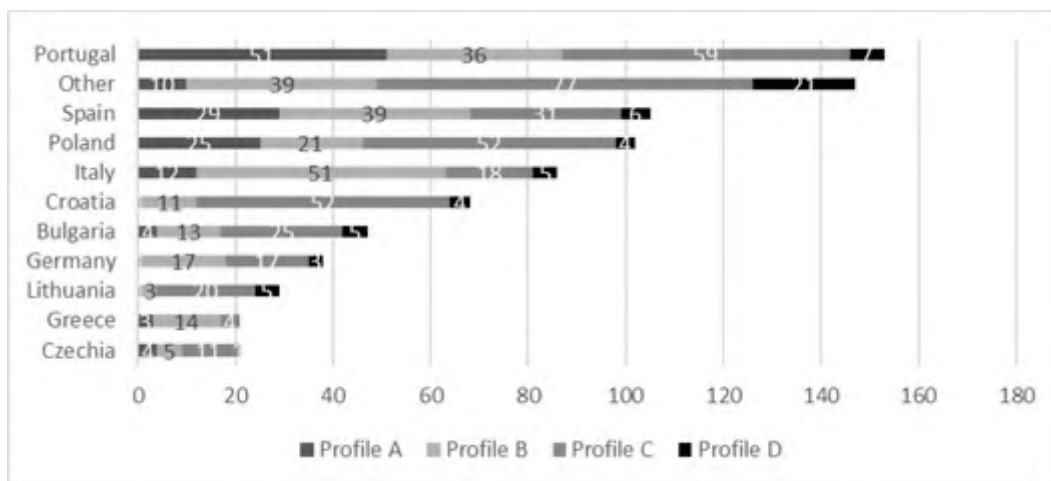
The public consultation had a separate section for each of the following groups of respondents:

- **Group A:** ESF participants: individual EU and non-EU citizens receiving ESF support now or since 2014;
- **Group B:** Individual EU and non-EU citizens who did not take part in the ESF: 'the general public', reporting either having an awareness of the ESF or no direct knowledge of the ESF measures;
- **Group C.1:** Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies, organisations involved in the management of the ESF that supposedly have a direct and detailed knowledge of the ESF support;

- **Group C.2:** Beneficiaries: organisations or entities receiving ESF funding for the implementation of a project;
- **Group C.3:** EU Funds Coordinating bodies, Certifying/Audit authorities, Members of a Monitoring Committee directly involved in the delivery of ESF.
- **Group D:** Other organisations: organisations with no direct role in the management, monitoring and implementation of the ESF including civil society.

Of the 817 responses, the highest number (370 or 45.3% of the total) was from the **group representing organisations managing/delivering the ESF**, followed by the general public (244 respondents or 29.9% of the total), ESF participants (141 - 17.3%) and other organisations (62 - 7.6%). Of the organisations managing/delivering the ESF, ESF beneficiaries provided the most responses (227 or 61.4% of the total) followed by managing authorities and intermediate bodies (104 responses or 28.1%), and EU funds coordinating bodies, certifying or audit authorities and members of monitoring committees (39 responses or 10.5%). Figure 6 presents the breakdown of respondents by stakeholder/profile group<sup>128</sup>.

**Figure 6: Breakdown of respondents by country of origin and group – TO10**



### 5.2.2. Targeted interviews with EU and national level stakeholders

Targeted interviews were conducted with: (i) EU-level stakeholders directly and indirectly linked to the themes of education and training and (ii) national stakeholders involved in ESF operations, primarily managing authorities and representatives of Education/Labour Ministries; and (iii) other stakeholders where relevant. A total of 25 interviews were conducted between October 2019 to March 2020 (See Table 6 below).

**Table 6: Targeted interviews completed**

Level	Organisation
EU	DG EMPL Unit F1 ESF Coordination
	DG EAC group interview with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit A2 Policy Strategy and Evaluation - Country analysis</li> <li>• Unit C2 Marie Skłodowska Curie actions</li> </ul>

<sup>128</sup> The figure only includes countries with at least 20 responses. The countries with fewer than 20 respondents were grouped together under ‘Other’.

Level	Organisation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unit B4 Erasmus+ Coordination</li> </ul>
	DG EMPL Unit E3 Vocational education, apprenticeships and adult learning
	EU Lifelong Learning Platform
	European University Association
	Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA)
	European Federation of Education Employers
	European Parliament: EMPL Committee
	European Student's Union
	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
	European Trade Union Committee for Education
	Business Europe
	SME United
	European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training
	European Vocational Training Association
	Eurochild
Austria	Ministry of Education Science and Research
Luxembourg	ESF Managing Authority; Ministry of Education Childhood and Youth
Denmark	Danish Business Authority (ESF MA)
Malta	ESF Managing Authority Ministry for European Affairs and Equality
Greece	ESF Managing Authority of OP Human Resource Management, Education and Lifelong Learning
Hungary	ESF Managing Authority
Latvia	Ministry of Education and Science
Sweden	ESF Managing Authority

### 5.2.3. Case studies

Case studies of 20 Operational Programmes in 12 Member States were conducted as part of the evaluation research.

An average of seven interviews were conducted per case study with stakeholders from the following categories:

- officials in charge of the specific OP;
- authority responsible for TO10 operations;
- major beneficiaries of ESF TO10 operations; and
- other stakeholders, including evaluators of ESF T10 measures, vocational training organisations, agencies dealing with illiteracy and early leavers from education and training, universities, etc.

The case study interviews took place between October 2019 and April 2020.

### 5.2.4. Policy Delphi validation process

A validation process involving workshops was planned in order to validate the findings of the evaluation. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, these workshops were replaced by online policy Delphi consultations, one for each investment priority, which took place between 27 April and 27 May 2020. The consultees included thematic experts, policy experts from relevant

Commission departments, ESF managing authorities, ESF TO10 beneficiaries, social partners, and EU-level NGOs.

During this process, 22 responses were received from a range of stakeholder groups as detailed in Table 7.

**Table 7: Respondents to the policy Delphi validation**

Type of stakeholder	Number of respondents
NGOs	6
Research and academic experts	4
National and regional education ministries and VET institutions	4
European institutions involved in education and training policy development	3
Social and economic partners at national and EU level	3
Beneficiaries	1
Managing authorities	1

### 5.3. Overview of results of consultation activities

#### 5.3.1. Effectiveness

Overall, there was consensus among stakeholders that progress has been made in ESF TO10 operations, but differences in performance were noted between countries, OPs and IPs. ESF participants' views were positive: of the 114 who responded to the public consultation effectiveness question 79 (or 56%) stated that ESF activities had fully met their initial expectations and 25 (or 17.7%) said that they had surpassed them. Of the 141 respondents, 74 (52.5%) reported that without EU support there would be less or no opportunities for people in their situation and 62 (44%) said that there would not be enough money to pay for such actions without the ESF. Only 3.5% (5 of the 141 respondents) considered that the ESF does not make a real difference. However, a notable minority of ESF participants felt that the support only partially met expectations (26 of the 141 respondents or 18.4%), while 2 respondents (1.4%) stated that the support did not meet their expectations.

Of the ESF participant surveys analysed, five out of six support this generally positive conclusion on the impact of the ESF. EU-level and national stakeholders consulted in the policy Delphi process also shared the view that the ESF's TO10 has contributed to structural changes and reforms of education and training systems at all levels. However, they also agreed that significant improvements could be made upscaling ESF initiatives.

There is some discrepancy in views on the **extent to which the ESF was effective in reaching all target groups**. Respondents replying to the public consultation on behalf of organisations felt that, overall, ESF operations were 'very' or 'mostly' successful in providing support to a large number of target groups. Of the 104 managing authorities/intermediate bodies that participated, 69 (or 66.3%) considered that the most effectively reached groups were: individuals with no or low qualifications and skills had been effectively reached; , 62 (or 59.6%) said the same about people with disabilities and 60 (or 57.7% - 60 out of 104) said the same about older workers. Of the 227 replying on behalf of beneficiary organisations, 133 (or 58.6%) considered teachers and trainers at all levels to have been reached effectively, while 126

(55.5%) said the same about students (, 118 (52%) about individuals with no or low qualifications or skills (, and 115 (50.7%) individuals with disabilities.

A small proportion of respondents who felt that ESF support was ‘mostly’ unsuccessful was low (10% or less) for all target groups listed. However, EU-level and national stakeholders consulted in the targeted interviews and in the case studies, highlighted several **challenges in reaching some of these target groups**, particularly the individuals who are most disadvantaged. Older workers, the low-skilled, Roma, refugees and migrants, the long-term unemployed and the disabled were identified by EU-level and national stakeholders as not having been sufficiently reached, both in the interviews and the policy Delphi responses. In the latter, respondents said that **measures risked focusing on ‘low hanging fruit’**, supporting people who need only minimal support anyway and leaving aside the more problematic cases.

By contrast, the **factors increasing the effectiveness** of ESF TO10 operations were generally agreed upon by all stakeholders responding to the public consultation’s qualitative open questions and being interviewed. They mentioned in particular: (i) operations that bring about systemic change and that are strategically planned; (ii) strong coordination and the involvement of local and regional stakeholders and non-public partners; and (iii) operations that focus on individuals and their specific support needs. Reducing the administrative burden and simplifying the governance structure of the fund was also frequently mentioned by stakeholders in the open questions and the targeted interviews. Respondents to the policy Delphi and the targeted interviews also strongly agreed that vulnerable groups could be reached more effectively by increasing the participation of civil society organisations, NGOs and local stakeholders.

### 5.3.2. *Relevance*

There was strong consensus among stakeholders that TO10 investment priorities and **planned operations have been and remain relevant to education and training needs**. Of the 71 respondents that answered the relevant question 58 (82%) agreed that the ESF should be involved in improving skills and supporting the development of education and training. Only 5 (or 7%) disagreed and would prefer to support education and training on the national or local level (the remaining 11% did not know or did not wish to answer). Survey respondents also pointed to the relevance of ESF operations. This is supported by EU and national stakeholders who all considered that ESF TO10 operations were relevant to the education and training needs in Member States. EU-level stakeholders said that the breadth of the investment priorities (IP) contributed to this relevance, as it allowed a range of operations for different education levels and groups in need to be programmed. EU-level and national stakeholders also cited this as a reason for the continued relevance of ESF TO10 operations throughout the programming period.

According to the public consultation, the most relevant actions included: (i) support for the unemployed to learn new skills to help find work; (ii), support to link tertiary education and training institutions with businesses and with local communities; and (iii) support for students with fewer opportunities to complete higher education scholarship studies. Those consultees in the case studies largely agreed, highlighting in particular the relevance of upskilling and reskilling measures. EU stakeholders stressed that all investment priorities, but in particular IP10.iii (lifelong learning) and IP10.iv (labour market relevance) are increasingly relevant given

the need to ensure the whole population is equipped with the right skills for a changing world of work.

However, stakeholders involved in IP10.iii and IP10.iv operations pointed out in the policy Delphi a decrease in partnership involvement, especially in VET, during the programming period, citing this as an obstacle to the relevance of operations. The **need for employers, trades unions and NGOs to be more involved** was stressed, and also emerged strongly in the targeted interviews, particularly from EU level stakeholders. There was consensus across a range of stakeholders that this was necessary to increase relevance of ESF TO10 to the needs of vulnerable groups, in particular.

### 5.3.3. *Efficiency*

There was a strong overall consensus among stakeholders **that most of the ESF activities are cost-effective**. Of 17 activities presented in the public consultation survey, 13 were considered cost-effective (more than 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed was the case). In all subgroups that were asked about the administrative burden, most respondents said the arrangements were appropriate: 62.3% of managing authority respondents (65 of 104), 59.5% of beneficiary organisation respondents (135 of 227) and 56.1% of certifying, coordination and monitoring body respondents (22 of 39).

However, the **management and control system and reporting and monitoring were judged as the most burdensome arrangements** by more than a third of respondents to the question 'How would you qualify the following administrative arrangements for the implementation of operations?' (370 total respondents). This is reflected in the views of EU-level and national stakeholders consulted. They all mentioned ESF regulatory requirements – with most highlighting the heavy reporting requirements – as posing challenges to efficient implementation. There is strong consensus that these heavy requirements are particularly burdensome for smaller beneficiaries. Stakeholders consulted in the targeted interviews, and through the case study interviews shared the view that voluntary organisations and NGOs involved in social inclusion activities find it more difficult to deal with the funding and data collection requirements. On the other end of the scale, communication arrangements were the most commonly deemed appropriate across respondents (by 264 of 370 or 71% of respondents).

The vast majority of national stakeholders interviewed for the targeted consultations and the case studies stated that **simplified cost options (SCOs) help improve efficiency**. Respondents to the policy Delphi validation agreed. However, these stakeholders also identified challenges in implementing them. Several mentioned that developing SCOs still involves a heavy administrative burden, and one that takes time to implement. Stakeholders spoke about delays from the European Commission in approving SCOs proposed by Member States. Public consultation respondents considered the application of SCOs to be the most inefficient administrative arrangement although several national respondents said that SCOs help simplify project preparation.

Several respondents to the public consultation suggested to **focus more on qualitative indicators** rather than quantitative measures to assess the results of the ESF measures. This was



also expressed by some national stakeholders, who suggested that results indicators should be more relevant to the IP goals.

#### 5.3.4. Coherence

Overall stakeholders expressed the view that the ESF's TO10 operations are generally coherent with other EU funding programmes, though views vary significantly per fund. There is consensus that **Erasmus+ and ERDF are the funds that are most coherent with ESF**. Of all funds, Erasmus+ was rated as the most coherent with TO10 by the highest proportion of respondents, 62.3% of the general public (107 of 173); 63.8% of organisations managing ESF (236 of 370); and 74% of other organisations (34 of 46), followed by the ERDF. These two funds were also the most frequently highlighted in the targeted interviews.

However, many of the stakeholders interviewed felt that coherence was a challenge during implementation. This was confirmed by respondents to the policy Delphi validation. There was agreement on the **complexity of having to apply under both funds for a joint project**, as well as on the factors influencing coherence, namely: (i) the lack of cooperation between institutions responsible for each fund on the national level; (ii) different implementation and delivery modes (direct vs shared management); (iii) the difference in target groups of the funds; and (iv) insufficient communication to potential beneficiaries on the possibility of combining funds.

**Views on coherence with other EU funding instruments are more mixed.** Of the members of the public that replied to the public consultation, many did not know or did not wish to provide an answer on whether ESF activities are coherent with a number of other schemes (i.e. COSME- 112 of 173 (65%), EURES- 110 of 173 (64%), AMIF- 102 of 173 (59%), other ESI Funds and Horizon 2020/MSCA 100 of 173 (58%)). The EU-level and national stakeholders interviewed were also less able to comment on the degree of coherence of ESF with the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions and Horizon 2020. However, the views expressed though they appear to agree on the **limited coherence with Horizon 2020 (MSCA)**. Stakeholder views from targeted interviews, case study interviews and the policy Delphi validation showed that coherence between ESF and MSCA was challenging in practice and only 29% from the general public and organisations managing/delivering ESF felt that there was coherence between the two funds.

#### 5.3.5. EU added value

The perception of EU added value resulting from ESF TO10 operations was positive overall among the range of stakeholders consulted. **The vast majority of ESF participants responding to the public consultation agreed that having ESF support made a difference**, though organisational respondents tended to be more positive. 323 out of the 370 organisation respondents (or 87.2%) indicated that more can be done than with national or local resources only. 73.9% of respondents from the general public (128 of 173) agreed. Other positive aspects highlighted were that new issues can be covered 41% of general public (71 of 173) and 61.8% of organisations (229 of 370) and that the ESF enables experimenting with new ways of delivering services (60 of 173 (39.3%) of general public and 212 of 370 (57.2%) of organisations)

A majority of stakeholders interviewed shared this view, highlighting in particular that ESF TO10 supported disadvantaged groups that would have otherwise not been targeted. Both EU-level and national stakeholders confirm that the ESF TO10 operations produced effects at national

and/or regional level that would not otherwise have taken place. However, a minority of stakeholders interviewed, coming particularly EU-level stakeholders, expressed the view that the **ESF TO10 support to innovation in education and training has been limited**. This is also reflected in the public consultation responses where 'ESF enables experimenting with new ways of delivering services' was the least selected advantage of ESF TO10 operations by the general public and individuals aware of the ESF but not receiving support (68 out of 173 respondents or 39.3%). Respondents to the policy Delphi agreed, highlighting that where innovation is achieved through the ESF it needs to be better embedded into national legislation to ensure spill over effects of the good practice.

## ANNEX 3: METHODS AND ANALYTICAL MODELS

### 1. OVERALL APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION WORK

In line with the Better Regulation guidelines, DG EMPL decided to base this evaluation on the work carried out by external evaluators and took the following approach:

- collect and analyse the relevant evidence;
- provide answers to all evaluation questions;
- present evidence-based conclusions.

**COVID-19 pandemic:** It shall be noted that the fieldwork for these evaluations was carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak reached Europe. The Corona Response Investment Initiative (CRII) will affect the support to Employment for the remainder of the current implementation period and the proposals for the next programming period will also aim at mitigating the consequences of this pandemic. This COVID-19 pandemic is a major negative shock to the global and European economy. Already at the end of March of 2020, a substantial negative economic impact on Europe has materialised, at least for the first half of 2020 and possibly longer if the pandemic is not contained rapidly. For the future, the degree of the negative outlook will depend on a number of parameters such as the lack of supply of critical materials, the effectiveness of containment measures, the downtime in manufacturing in the EU work days lost in companies and public administrations, and demand effects (e.g. mobility restrictions, travel cancellations).

### 2. RATIONALE OF THE EVALUATION

The main objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU value added of ESF support to the thematic objective 8, 9 and 10. The evaluation includes both an individual assessment of each country and a cross-cutting and comparative assessment. External contractors collected and examined data covering 2014-2018 and prepared three studies<sup>129</sup>.

### 3. EVALUATION QUESTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The evaluations were based on the following overarching evaluation questions:

- **Effectiveness:** How effective has the ESF been in achieving the objectives of thematic objective 8/9/10?
- **Efficiency:** How efficient has the ESF been in the achievement of the objectives of thematic objective 8/9/10?
- **Relevance:** How relevant have the operations funded by the thematic objective 8 been? How relevant are the ESF operations under thematic objective 9/10?

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<sup>129</sup> Supporting studies:

TO8: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8330&furtherPubs=yes>; TO9: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8350&furtherPubs=yes>; TO10: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8346&furtherPubs=yes>

- **Coherence:** How coherent have the operations funded by thematic objective 8/9/10 been among themselves and with other actions in the same field?
- **EU Value added:** What is the EU added value of the ESF-funded operations in the field of employment and mobility / of social inclusion, combating poverty and anti-discrimination / of education?
- **Sustainability:** How sustainable the ESF-funded operations under TO8 have been?

Each evaluation question was further detailed in sub-questions presented in Table 9 below. The evaluation work and the report were structured around the conclusions reached on each of the questions.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The evaluation was based on a complex methodology aimed at collecting solid evidence and providing well-informed answers to the evaluation questions. This included:

- **Desk research:**
  - analysis of the monitoring data in the SFC2014 database (System for Fund Management in the European Union);
  - in-depth analysis of the operational programmes (OPs) and Annual Implementation Reports, and specifically the 2018 Annual Implementation Reports that include reported data as of 31st December 2018;
  - The mapping of investment priorities, target populations and types of operations, based on the SFC2014 database, operational programmes, Annual Implementation Reports and related documentation, including the Commission's Country-specific Recommendations.
  - econometric analysis and provision of data to the Joint Research Centre (JRC) for the RHOMOLO simulations;
  - literature review (policy documents, regulations, national and EU-wide evaluations, ESF websites and publications);
  - Synthesis of evaluation reports by member states using the database of evaluations compiled by the Evaluation Helpdesk, Annual Implementation Reports and additional desk research.
- **Public consultation:** assisting the Commission in developing the questionnaire, and analysing the results of the public consultation.
- **Cost-effectiveness analysis** using a combination of SFC2014 programme data (for unit costs), relevant counterfactual impact evaluations, feedback from the stakeholders both through the public consultation as well as EU level focus group, case studies and a study of micro-data where available. In addition, first attempts were made to conduct cost benefit analyses for TO9 (Social inclusion) and TO10 (education and training).
- **Case studies:** addressing the research questions at national and regional level, based on desk research, interviews and focus groups.
- **Interviews** with desk officers, Managing Authorities and other stakeholders, in particular for the case studies.
- **Holding focus groups** in the Member States and at the EU level **or Delphi surveys** when the EU level focus group has not been possible due to the Covid-19.

#### 5. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The various sources were triangulated, and where the evidence was insufficient or inconclusive, the approaches were combined: data-based, documentary and perception-based sources as

well as quantitative and qualitative techniques, depending on the nature of the evaluation question and the strengths of the relevant data and approaches.

The evaluation drew on a number of sources providing opinions and perceptions, including surveys, interviews and the public consultation. Data on opinions and perceptions are important evidence where evaluation questions elicit the views of stakeholders. In some cases, respondents or interviewees may be the only source of knowledge or witness accounts of events when no other sources are available.

Under the Better Regulation guidelines, the public consultation is an important tool for collecting stakeholder input and views on EU policy initiatives. It cannot be expected to provide a fully representative view of EU public opinion, but it does offer a channel for the people who care about a given issue to voice their opinion. As expected, respondents' knowledge and involvement in running employment operations differed, but the design of the public consultation made it possible to distinguish between the respondents who were well-informed and others. This distinction fed into the analysis of the responses, and triangulated with other sources of evidence.

In conclusion, while acknowledging that there are some data gaps and methodical limitations, the evaluation presents well-informed, evidence-based and reliable answers to the questions, to the extent possible.

**Table 1: Evaluation questions and sub-questions for each specific supporting study**

TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
<p><b>How effective has the ESF been in achieving the objectives of thematic objective 8?</b></p> <p>1.1. To what extent have the financial implementation and the achievement of the expected outputs progressed according to the targets set in the programmes? What are the main factors involved (delays in implementation, ESF absorption...)?</p> <p>1.2. How and to what extent does ESF contribute to the achievement of the general objectives thematic objective 8? In particular, to what extent have the ESF operations, contributed to the positive evolution of the employment situation, the labour mobility, the self-employment and the other objectives of thematic objective 8 up to now? How did it contribute to addressing problems faced by target groups?</p> <p>1.7. To what extent has the ESF contributed to structural changes in national education systems, vocational training systems, public employment systems or employment policies?</p> <p>1.8. What was the concrete contribution of the TO8 operations to the promotion of gender equality and active ageing which are also objectives of TO8?</p> <p>1.3. To what extent were the target groups reached by</p>	<p><b>How effective has the ESF been in achieving the objectives of thematic objective 9?</b></p> <p>1.1. To what extent have the financial implementation and the achievement of the expected outputs progressed according to the targets set in the programmes? What were the main factors involved (delays in implementation, ESF absorption...)?</p> <p>1.2. How and to what extent does ESF contribute to the promotion of social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination and the social inclusion target of Europe 2020?</p>	<p><b>10 How effective has the ESF been in achieving the objectives of thematic objective 10?</b></p> <p>1.1. To what extent have the financial implementation and the achievement of the expected outputs progressed according to the output targets set in the programmes? What are the main factors involved (delays in implementation, ESF absorption...)? In particular, what is the progress made by ESF on target indicators in higher education and secondary education among all countries?</p> <p>1.2. How and to what extent does ESF contribute to the investment in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning and education targets of Europe 2020?</p>	<p>6.1</p> <p>6.1.1</p> <p>6.1.2</p>	<p>(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)</p> <p>(1) (2) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)</p>
<p>1.3. How were relevant national strategies reached by</p>	<p>1.3. How were relevant national strategies</p>	<p>1.3. How were relevant national strategies and</p>	<p>6.3</p>	<p>(1) (2)</p>

TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
<p>the operations, including disadvantaged persons, especially those from marginalized communities and those leaving education without qualifications? To what extent higher education institutions/universities were beneficiaries of TO8 investments (in terms of numbers and size projects)? Have any Member States invested in developing graduate tracking systems or graduate tracer studies or similar measures for measuring outcomes of graduates on the labour market?</p> <p>1.4. What was the quality and timeliness of employment obtained?</p> <p>1.5. Which types of operations were the most effective and most sustainable, for which groups and in which contexts (e.g. more developed, less developed and transition regions, urban and rural areas etc.)?</p>	<p>and policy contexts and challenges translated into operations?</p> <p>1.4. Which changes (intended and unintended) did the ESF support bring to the target groups? How were these changes, notably soft outcomes, assessed and documented? Which types of operations are or were the most effective and most sustainable, for which groups and in which contexts?</p>	<p>policy contexts and challenges translated into operations?</p> <p>1.4. Which changes (intended and unintended) did the ESF support bring to each specific target group, e.g. young people in initial education and training, NEETs, low qualified adults, people in employment, unemployed, inactive? Which types of operations are or were the most effective and most sustainable, for which groups and in which contexts? In particular, did the ESF support impact equally on groups with advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds? To what extent was access to the different sectors of education (e.g. higher education) for underrepresented groups facilitated thanks to ESF? What kind of efficiency-enhancing measures did ESF finance in higher education as part of investment priority TO10(ii)? To what extent have non-formal pathways been used to prevent and address early school leaving and support re-integration in education and training?</p>	<p>6.1.3</p>	<p>(3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (5)</p>
<p>1.6. What main factors (geographical, socioeconomic, organisational...) had a bigger impact on the effectiveness of ESF operations under thematic objective 8, by type of operation?</p>	<p>1.5. Which factors facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of ESF operations under thematic objective 9, by type of operation?</p>	<p>1.5. Which factors facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of ESF operations under thematic objective 10, by type of operation and by main target group?</p>	<p>6.1.4</p>	<p>(1) (3) (5)</p>

TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
<p><b>How efficient has the ESF been in the achievement of the objectives of thematic objective 8?</b></p> <p>2.1. To what extent were operations cost-effective? What types of operations were more and less cost-effective? In what contexts? What were the determining factors?</p> <p>2.2. Are there significant cost differences between Member States/Regions in the implementation of the operations? What are these differences related to?</p>	<p><b>How efficient has the ESF been in the achievement of the objectives of thematic objective 9?</b></p> <p>2.1. To what extent were operations cost-effective? What types of operations were more and less cost-effective? In what contexts? What were the determining factors?</p> <p>2.2. Are there significant cost differences between Member States/Regions in the implementation of the operations? What are these differences related to?</p>	<p><b>How efficient has the ESF been in the achievement of the objectives of thematic objective 10?</b></p> <p>2.1. To what extent were operations cost-effective? To what extent are the costs of the intervention proportionate, given the changes/effects it has achieved? What types of operations were more and less cost-effective for which target group? In what contexts? What were the determining factors?</p> <p>2.2. Are there significant cost differences between Member States/regions in the implementation of similar operations? What are these differences related to?</p>	<p>6.2</p> <p>6.2.1</p>	<p>(1) (2) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (2) (3) (5)</p>
<p>2.3. To what extent were the organisational arrangements, including management and control systems at all levels conducive to the effectiveness of operations? Was there administrative burden, in particular gold plating involved?</p> <p>2.4. In particular, how timely and cost-efficient were the procedures for reporting and monitoring?</p>	<p>2.3. How do organisational arrangements influence service delivery by beneficiaries or, eventually, lead to non-take up by potential beneficiaries? To what extent is non-take-up a choice or due to non-awareness of the instrument?</p> <p>2.4. To what extent were the organisational arrangements, including management and control systems at all levels, conducive to the effectiveness of operations? Is there gold plating? Were the procedures for reporting and monitoring timely and efficient?</p>	<p>2.3. How do organisational arrangements influence service delivery by beneficiaries or, eventually, lead to non-take up by potential beneficiaries? To what extent is non-take-up a choice or due to non-awareness of the instrument?</p> <p>2.4. To what extent were the organisational arrangements, including management and control systems at all levels, conducive to the effectiveness of operations? Is there gold plating? Are there opportunities to simplify the national legislation or reduce unnecessary regulatory costs without undermining the intended objectives of the intervention? Were the procedures for reporting and monitoring timely and efficient?</p>	<p>6.2.2</p>	<p>(1) (3) (5)</p>
<p>2.5. How visible were TO8 funded operations?</p> <p><b>How relevant have the operations funded by the thematic objective 8 been?</b></p> <p>3.1. To what extent were the objectives and the operations funded by the ESF relevant to the needs of</p>	<p>2.5. How visible are ESF funded operations under TO9?</p> <p><b>How relevant are the ESF operations under thematic objective 9?</b></p> <p>3.1. Were the objectives and the operations funded by the ESF relevant to the needs of</p>	<p>2.5. How visible are ESF funded operations under TO10</p> <p><b>How relevant are the ESF operations under thematic objective 10?</b></p> <p>3.1. Were the objectives and the operations funded by the ESF relevant to the needs of target groups?</p>	<p>6.2.3</p> <p>6.3</p> <p>6.3.1</p>	<p>(1) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (4) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (4) (5)</p>



TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
<p>target groups?</p> <p>3.3. Were the most relevant groups, in the different socio-economic contexts (e.g. more developed, less developed and transition groups; urban and rural areas etc.), targeted starting from the design stage? Were the most important needs of these groups addressed?</p> <p>3.4. Were the TO8 operations undertaken suitable to support active ageing and gender equality? How the TO8 operations implemented fall within the broader context of TO8?</p> <p>3.2. To what extent were OPs flexible and able to adapt to changes in the implementation context, notably the evolution in the situation of employment and mobility?</p> <p><b>How coherent have the operations funded by thematic objective 8 been among themselves and with other (actions in the same field)?</b></p> <p>4.1. In which manner were the ESF operations of TO8 complementary with each other? What were the main factors in this regard?</p> <p>4.2. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other thematic objectives and with other programmes (e.g. EURES, EaSI, Erasmus+, ERDF, EAFRD, EMFF, EGF...) oriented to employment and mobility at the EU level?</p> <p>4.3. To which extent are the investments under TO8 contributing and how consistent these are with the National Reform Programmes and, the Country Specific Recommendations in the framework of the</p>	<p>target groups? How were the different target groups prioritised and the actions tailored to their specific needs? Were the most important needs of these groups addressed?</p> <p>3.2. Were the most relevant groups, in the different socio-economic contexts targeted starting from the design stage? How was the partnership and multi-level governance implemented?</p> <p>3.3. To what extent were OPs flexible and able to adapt to changes in the implementation context or political priorities?</p> <p><b>How coherent are the operations funded by thematic objective 9 among themselves and with other actions in the same field?</b></p> <p>4.2. Were the ESF operations of TO9 complementary with each other and with interventions under other thematic objectives? What were the main factors in this regard?</p> <p>4.1. Were ESF interventions in line with EU policies on social inclusion?</p> <p>4.3. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other EU funding instruments such as ERDF, EARDF, EaSI, FEAD or AMIF?</p> <p>4.4. To which extent are the investments under TO9 consistent with the analyses and priorities identified in the context of the</p>	<p>To what extent are they still relevant? How were the different target groups prioritised and the actions tailored to their specific needs? Were the most important needs of these groups addressed?</p> <p>3.2. Were the most relevant groups, in the different education and socio-economic contexts targeted starting from the design stage? How was the partnership and multi-level governance implemented?</p> <p>3.3. To what extent were OPs flexible and able to adapt to changes in the implementation context or political priorities?</p> <p><b>How coherent are the operations funded by thematic objective 10 among themselves and with other actions in the same field?</b></p> <p>4.2. Were the ESF operations of TO10 complementary with each other and with interventions under other thematic objectives? What were the main factors fostering and/or hindering complementarity?</p> <p>4.1. Were ESF interventions in line with EU policies on education and training? To which extent are the investments under TO10 contributing to other EU initiatives such as the New Skills Agenda for Europe? To what extent did they take advantage of or were aligned to EU policy tools, such as the Europass documents, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Quality Assurance Framework in Vocational Education and Training</p>	<p>6.3.3</p> <p>6.4</p> <p>6.4.1</p> <p>6.4.2</p>	<p>(1) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (5)</p> <p>(1) (3) (5)</p>

TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
<p>European Semester? 4.4. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other activities supporting employment and mobility at national/regional level?</p>	<p>European Semester notably in the Country Reports, the National Reform Programmes and, the Country Specific Recommendations? 4.5. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other activities supporting social inclusion and combating poverty and discrimination at national/regional level?</p>	<p>(EQAVET) and the European Credit transfer system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)? 4.3. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other EU funding instruments such as ERDF, EARDF, ERASMUS+ or AMIF? 4.4. To which extent are the investments under TO10 consistent with the analyses and priorities identified in the context of the European Semester notably in the Country Reports, the National Reform Programmes and the Country Specific Recommendations? To which extent fulfilling ex ante conditionalities in the different sectors led to structural reforms or legislative changes in those countries/regions that had to work to fulfil them? 4.5. To what extent were they complementary and coherent with other activities supporting education, training and vocational training at national/regional level?</p>		
<p><b>What is the EU added value of the ESF-funded operations in the field of employment and mobility?</b></p> <p>5.1. To what extent did the ESF-funded operations produce effects at the national and regional level that would not have taken place without the EU intervention? This question shall be addressed from the following perspectives:</p> <p><i>Volume effect:</i> Have the operations added to existing or directly produced beneficial effects that can be measured in terms of volume?</p>	<p><b>What is the EU added value of the ESF-funded operations in the field of social inclusion, combating poverty and anti-discrimination?</b></p> <p>5.1. To what extent did the ESF-funded operations produce effects at the national and regional level that would otherwise not have taken place without the EU intervention? This question shall be addressed from the following perspectives:</p> <p><i>Volume effect:</i> Have the operations added to existing actions or directly produced beneficial effects that can be measured in</p>	<p><b>What is the EU added value of the ESF-funded operations in the field of education?</b></p> <p>5.1 To what extent did the ESF-funded operations produce effects at the national and regional level that would otherwise not have taken place without the EU intervention? This question shall be addressed from the following perspectives:</p> <p><i>Volume effect:</i> Have the operations added to existing actions or directly produced beneficial effects that can be measured in terms of volume?</p>	6.5	(1) (3) (5)
			6.5	(1) (3) (5)
			6.5.1	(1) (3) (5)

TO8 – Employment and labour mobility	TO9 – Social inclusion	TO10 – Education and training	Section in the staff working document	Data and info sources
	terms of volume?			
<b>Scope effect:</b> Have the operations broadened existing actions by addressing groups or policy areas that would otherwise not have been addressed?	<b>Scope effect:</b> Have the operations broadened existing actions by addressing groups or policy areas that would otherwise not have been addressed?	<b>Scope effect:</b> Have the operations broadened existing actions by addressing groups or policy areas that would otherwise not have been addressed?	6.5.2	(1) (3) (5)
<b>Role effect:</b> Have the operations supported innovation and the transfer of ideas that have been subsequently rolled out in different contexts?	<b>Role effect:</b> Have the operations supported innovation and the transfer of ideas that have been subsequently rolled out in different contexts?	<b>Role effect:</b> Have the operations supported innovation and the transfer of ideas that have been subsequently rolled out in different contexts?	6.5.3	(1) (3) (5)
<b>Process effect:</b> Have Member State administrations and participating organisations derived benefits from being involved in the operations? ( <i>Sustainability question</i> )	<b>Process effect:</b> Have Member State administrations and participating organisations derived benefits from being involved in the operations? To what extent the effects of ESF support under TO10 are likely to continue after the end of the funding, both at individual, institutional and policy level?	<b>Process effect:</b> Have Member State administrations and participating organisations derived benefits from being involved in the operations? To what extent the effects of ESF support under TO10 are likely to continue after the end of the funding, both at individual, institutional and policy level?	6.5.4	(1) (3) (5)
<b>How sustainable the ESF-funded operations under TO8 have been?</b>				
6.1. To what extent the effects of ESF support under TO8 are likely to continue after the end of the funding, both at individual and policy level?			6.5.4	(1) (3) (5)
			6.5.4	(1) (3) (5)

Data and info sources to reply evaluation questions: (1) – external study; (2) – SFC2014; (3) – national evaluations; (4) – EUROSTAT data; (5) public consultations

## ANNEX 4: ESF INTERVENTION LOGIC

