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Ex-post evaluation of the 2007-2013 ESF Programmes

Commission staff working document

Ex post evaluation of the 2007-2013 ESF programmes

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List of acronyms

AIR	annual implementation report
A2E	access and sustainable inclusion in employment
ALMP	active labour market policy
CIE	counterfactual impact evaluation
CONV	convergence
CRIE	Centre of Research for Impact Evaluation
CSR	country-specific recommendation
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
FEI	financial engineering instrument
HC	human capital
HE	higher education
LLL	lifelong learning
LTU	long-term unemployed
MA	managing authority
OP	Operational Programme
PAX	priority axis
PES	public employment service
PP	promoting partnerships
RCE	regional competitiveness and employment
SCO	simplified cost option
SI	social inclusion
SIC	strengthening institutional capacity
SFC	System for Fund Management
VET	vocational education and training

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This staff working document (SWD) presents the main findings of the *ex post* evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF) operational programmes (OPs) for the 2007-2013 programming period.

Background

During 2007-2013 programming period ESF aimed to contribute to the priorities of the Community as regards strengthening economic and social cohesion by improving employment and job opportunities, enhancing human capital and the adaptability of workers and reinforcing the social inclusion of disadvantaged people in the EU. Compared with the previous programming period ESF should have closer links to EU employment policies and objectives, greater flexibility to decide how to achieve common objectives and a wider range of activities for regions under the convergence objective.

The socio-economic context in which the ESF OPs were programmed (before 2008) was very different from the period in which they were implemented, dominated by the economic and financial crisis. In 2008 employment and unemployment rates started to deteriorate and only showed a recovery path since 2014. However, during the programming period employment participation rates increased, early school leaving decreased and higher education attainment rates increased by 7 pp over the same period. There was a significant decrease in the rates of people at risk of poverty in Central and Eastern European countries, though they increased in some old Member States.

Resources mobilised by the ESF

The total allocation for the 117 mono fund ESF OPs was EUR 115.6 billion, of which EUR 76.8 billion came from the EU budget, EUR 35.1 billion from national public contributions and EUR 3.7 billion contributed by private funds. This allocation supported operations that were carried out between January 2007 and December 2015 and was characterised by the following:

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

Key quantitative achievements

- The ESF registered 98.7 million participations by individuals, evenly spread between the inactive (36 %), the employed (33 %) and the unemployed (30 %);
- Key target groups supported included the low-skilled (40 %), young people (30 %) and the disadvantaged (at least 21 %);
- 51.2 million participations by women were recorded, meaning a relatively balanced participation by gender (52 % women versus 48 % men) at EU level;
- At least 31.8 million positive results were achieved:

- 9.4 million participants gained employment, of whom at least 0.3 million became self-employed;
- 8.7 million gained a qualification/certificate; and
- 13.7 million reported another positive result, such as improving skills, competences, increased chances in the labour market, continued education, etc;
- At least 276 000 entities were supported and at least 109 000 products reported;
- Based on macroeconomic simulations, the HC investments are estimated to have had a positive impact on GDP (0.25 % increase) and productivity. These estimated effects are much stronger in the Central and Eastern European countries (1.5 % increase), but they are also positive for the EU-15 (0.2 % increase).

Main findings of the evaluation

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

Main lessons learned

Many of the lessons learned have already been taken into account in the regulatory framework for the 2014-2020 programming period since they confirm the ex-ante assessment made by the Commission in preparation of the current period. These refer notably to the closer alignment with EU and national priorities, keeping flexibility to adjust to emerging needs, ensuring coverage of disadvantaged groups, focusing on young and older people, promoting the customisation of support, strengthening the results orientation and synergies with other EU instruments. These include also addressing the limitations faced regarding the design of programmes, aggregation of data on participations and results.

Others areas will be considered in the context of preparations for the ESF post-2020, notably the continued need to simplify and reduce administrative burden.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the evaluation

In the 2007-2013 programming period, the ESF was, together with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), one of the structural funds aimed at strengthening economic and social cohesion in the European Union. Article 49(3) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 laying down general provisions on the ERDF, ESF and the Cohesion Fund requires the Commission to carry out an *ex post* evaluation by 31 December 2015¹.

The purpose of the evaluation is to present findings on the achievements of all ESF OPs, conclusions for economic and social cohesion policy at EU level and lessons learned for future programmes. The ERDF and Cohesion fund are the subject of their own evaluation and SWD².

1.2 Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation covers all 117 OPs in all 28 Member States funded under the convergence, and the regional competitiveness and employment objectives.

The programming period ran from 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2013, but operations could be supported and carried out until 31 December 2015.³ To allow for a consistent and quality-checked comparison of data, this staff working document draws on 2014 data in annual implementation reports that Member States submitted to the Commission, and on Member States' evaluations published, by 30 June 2015.

The regulatory framework for 2000-2006 served as baseline for the evaluation. This SWD presents changes introduced in the regulatory framework during the 2007-2013 programming period (see section 2.2) and concludes on their effects.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE ESF⁴ 2007-2013 PROGRAMMES

2.1. The objectives of the ESF in 2007-2013 and overall intervention logic

The ESF is established by Articles 162-164 (Title XI) TFEU in order to improve employment opportunities for workers in the internal market and thereby to contribute to raising the standard of living. Under Article 175 TFEU, the ESF should also contribute to the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

In the 2007-2013 programming period, the ESF was governed by the following regulations:

- Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 laying down general provisions on the ERDF, ESF and the Cohesion Fund (the General Regulation);
- Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 on the European Social Fund (the ESF Regulation); and
- Commission Regulation (EC) No 1828/2006 setting out rules for the implementation of the General Regulation (the Implementing Regulation).

¹ See more in Annex 5

² See SWD(2016) 318 final of 19.9.2016, Ex-post evaluation of the ERDF and Cohesion Fund 2007-2013

³ According to Article 56 of the General Regulation, financial instruments can be supported beyond this date.

⁴ More information on ESF may be found at: <http://ec.europa.eu/esf/home.jsp>

Article 2 of the ESF Regulation provides that *‘the ESF shall contribute to the priorities of the Community as regards strengthening economic and social cohesion by improving employment and job opportunities, encouraging a high level of employment and more and better jobs. It shall do so by supporting Member States’ policies aiming to achieve full employment and quality and productivity at work, promote social inclusion, including the access of disadvantaged people to employment, and reduce national, regional and local employment disparities. In particular, the ESF shall support actions in line with measures taken by Member States on the basis of the **guidelines adopted under the European Employment Strategy**, as incorporated into the Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs, and the accompanying recommendations’*. Employment Guidelines 17-24 for 2005-2008⁵ and 2008-2010⁶ highlighted three priorities for action under Member States’ policies:

- attract and retain more people in employment, increase labour supply and modernise social protection systems;
- improve the adaptability of workers and enterprises; and
- increase HC investment through better education and skills.

These priorities were taken up in the 2007-2013 Community strategic guidelines for cohesion policy⁷ as the reference for HC activities. The guidelines also stated that appropriate attention should be given to investments to improve efficiency in public administrations and build administrative capacity at national, regional and local levels.

ESF programmes had to take into account the country-specific challenges and priorities as highlighted in country specific recommendations and national reform programmes. The programmes, whether managed at national or regional level, had to address territorial disparities effectively and be geared to needs in different areas.

Article 2(2) of the ESF Regulation provides that *‘in carrying out the tasks referred to in paragraph 1, the ESF shall support the priorities of the Community as regards the need to reinforce social cohesion, strengthen productivity and competitiveness, and promote economic growth and sustainable development. In so doing, the ESF shall take into account the relevant priorities and objectives of the Community in the fields of education and training, increasing the participation of economically inactive people in the labour market, combating social exclusion — especially that of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities — and promoting equality between women and men and non-discrimination’*.

The overall intervention logic of the ESF during the programming period that was used in the framework of this evaluation can thus be summarised as follows⁸:

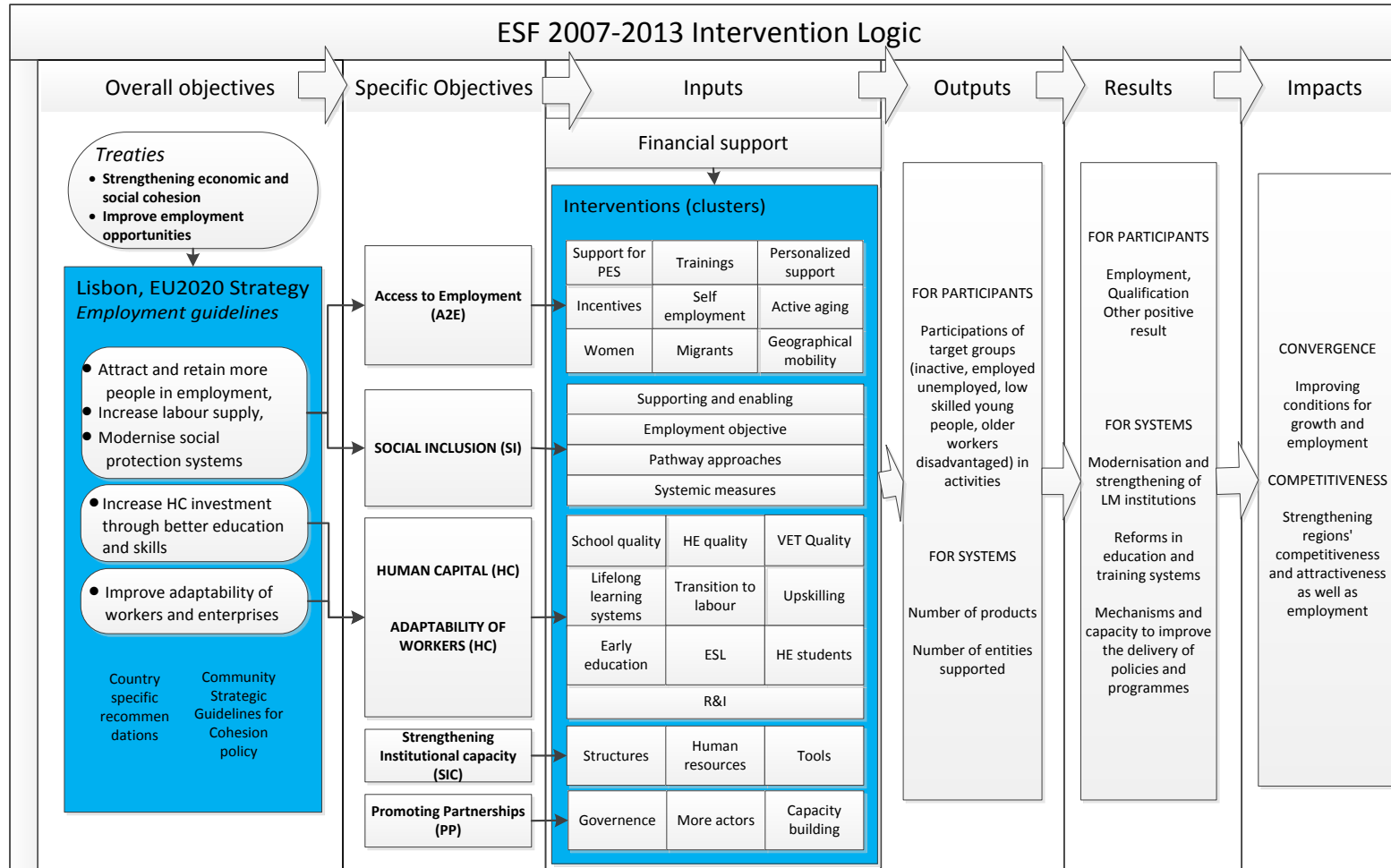
⁵ Council Decision of 12 July 2005 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (2005/600/EC); <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008D0618&from=EN>

⁶ Council decision of 15 July 2008 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (2008/618/EC) http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2007/osc/l_29120061021en00110032.pdf

⁷ Council Decision of 6 October 2006 on Community strategic guidelines on cohesion (2006/702/EC); <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32005D0600&from=EN>

⁸ Clusters of interventions are presented in more detail in Table 4 (page 15), outputs and results in effectiveness section 5.2

Figure 1: Goals and intervention logic of ESF



In 2010, the Union replaced the Lisbon strategy with the Europe 2020 strategy to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. A new set of guidelines was adopted for Member States' employment policies,⁹ including a set of quantified EU headline targets to be achieved by 2020:

- raise the employment rate for women and men aged 20-64 to 75 %;
- reduce early school leaving rates to less than 10 % and increase the proportion of 30-34 year-olds having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40 %; and
- reduce poverty by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion.

The ESF programmes were mobilised to support the implementation of the new guidelines and the achievement of the objectives.

Within the Cohesion policy framework ESF contributed to two objectives: the Convergence objective (CONV) and the Regional competitiveness and employment (RCE) objective. The range of eligible actions and financial resources were wider for the former. For the latter, Community resources needed to be much more focused to achieve a significant impact. For each area, Article 3 of the ESF Regulation defined the actions and priorities to be supported by the ESF in the framework of the CONV and RCE objectives:

- enhancing **human capital** (referred to under as HC), with some actions that were eligible only under the CONV objective (e.g. the implementation of reforms in education and training systems or the development of human potential in research and innovation);
- increasing the **adaptability** of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs with a view to improving the anticipation and positive management of economic change (presented together with other HC activities in this document);
- enhancing **access to employment (A2E)** and the sustainable inclusion in the labour market of job seekers and inactive people, preventing unemployment, in particular long-term and youth unemployment, encouraging active ageing and longer working lives, and increasing participation in the labour market;
- improving the **social inclusion (SI)** of disadvantaged people with a view to their sustainable integration in employment, and combating all forms of discrimination in the labour market;
- **promoting partnerships (PP)**, pacts and initiatives through networking among relevant stakeholders, such as the social partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at

⁹ Council Decision of 21 October 2010 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (2010/707/EU); see:

Guideline 7: Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality;

Guideline 8: Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting LLL;

Guideline 9: Improving the quality and performance; of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education; and

Guideline 10: Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty.

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32010D0707&from=EN>

transnational, national, regional and local levels, in order to mobilise for reforms in the field of employment and labour market inclusiveness; and

- **strengthening institutional capacity (SIC)** and the efficiency of national, regional and local public administrations and public services, and, where relevant, of the social partners and NGOs, with a view to promoting reforms, better regulation and good governance, especially in the economic, employment, education, social, environmental and judicial fields (in the framework of the CONV objective only and Member States eligible for the Cohesion Fund).

Table 1: Main differences between RCE and CONV objectives

	RCE	CONV
Objectives ¹⁰	Strengthening regions' competitiveness and attractiveness as well as employment	Speeding up the convergence of the least-developed Member States and regions by improving conditions for growth and employment
Criteria	Regions with GDP above 75 % of the EU average	Regions with GDP below 75 % of the EU average
Activities	HC, SI, A2E, PP	HC (expanded scope), SI, A2E, SIC, PP
Co-financing rate	Up to 50 %	75-85 %

In practice the activities of the Fund take the form of operational programmes (OPs). The ESF programmes were negotiated within the framework described above. OPs include information on the socio-economic situation and the specific challenges identified by the Country Specific Recommendations, the priorities axes (PAX) chosen and their specific (quantified) targets (Art. 37 of the General Regulation). Targets that are set at PAX level thus are contingent on the nature of the expected change in the particular circumstances. As indicators are often highly specific it is impossible to aggregate them into common categories such as on targeted coverage of specific groups and operational goals across of the whole EU. While the contribution to the overall objectives was verified during the negotiation of OPs, no quantified targets for reaching the overall objectives were set in advance at EU, national or regional level, hindering potential assessment of the overall impact on the economic and social cohesion.

2.2. Main changes in ESF rules in 2007-2013 versus 2000-2006

A number of key new elements were introduced in the 2007-2013 programming period as compared with the previous period. These are summarised below:

Table 2: Main changes introduced in the 2007-2013 programming period

Area	New elements
Policy choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • closer link to the employment strategy and relevant CSRs

¹⁰ Article 3 of General Regulation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concentration of support
Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater flexibility to choose how to achieve common objectives • wider scope of activities under the CONV objective (expanded HC and introduction of SIC)
Programme implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introduction of flat rates and SCOs • expanded scope and use of FEIs • single audit approach
Monitoring system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reporting of characteristics of ESF participations (outputs) by PAx (Annex XXIII to the General Regulation)
Evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discontinuation of mid-term evaluations by Member States, new requirement to support significant change or revision with an evaluation

The closer link to the Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs (and subsequently the Europe 2020 strategy) and the relevant country-specific recommendations (CSRs) was discussed in section 2.1.

ESF 2007-2013 also aimed to concentrate resources on the areas where it could have the most impact in achieving its objectives. This principle was spelled out in Article 4(2) of the ESF Regulation: *‘Within operational programmes, resources shall be directed towards the most important needs and focus on those policy areas where ESF support can have a significant effect in attaining the objectives of the programme’*.

Member States were given greater flexibility in selecting priorities¹¹ than was the case for the 2000-2006 period.

OPs eligible under the CONV objective, to facilitate convergence by regions/countries lagging behind, were allowed to fund activities to build institutional capacity (unlike OPs under the RCE objective) and to fund a wider range of HC activities (see above) than under the RCE objective.

To simplify ESF management, Member States were allowed to declare indirect costs (overheads) on a flat-rate basis up to 20 % of direct costs of an operation. In 2009, in the context of the European Economic Recovery Plan, the ESF Regulation was amended to expand the possibility of applying flat rates for indirect costs, standard scales of unit costs and lump sums.

Although the use of financial engineering instruments (FEIs) was already eligible in the previous programming period, the General Regulation expanded their scope and their use was consistently promoted to attract private-sector capital and make more efficient use of resources.

Responsibility for controlling ESF spending is shared by the Commission and the Member States. The single-audit approach (allowing the Commission to rely where possible on information provided by national audit bodies) was introduced in 2007-2013 on the basis of provisions in the General Regulation (Article 73), *‘in order to make best possible use of resources and to avoid unjustified duplication of work’*. In 2000-2006, it had only been possible

¹¹ See in particular Article 37 of the General Regulation.

to cooperate on the basis of bilateral administrative arrangements (Article 38 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999).

The ESF Regulation introduced a new system of MAs reporting on the basis of common indicators (see Annex XXIII to the General Regulation) on certain characteristics of participants in a funded intervention: their status on the labour market, gender, age category, education level and possible disadvantage markers such as being a migrant or belonging to a minority.

In 2000-2006, Member States were required to carry out mid-term evaluations. This requirement was discontinued in 2007-2013 and a new requirement introduced for Member States to carry out evaluations linked to the monitoring of OPs, in particular when it detects a significant departure from the original goals or where proposals are made for the revision of OPs (Article 48 of the General Regulation).

The largely positive effect of these changes is analysed throughout this document and conclusions are drawn in chapter 6.

2.3. State of play of implementation

The ESF is implemented through shared management between the Member States and the Commission, with the exception of technical assistance at the Commission's initiative, which the Commission manages directly. Member States' administrations (at national, regional or local level) select operations to be financed and take responsibility for their day-to-day management. Working together with the Member States, the Commission ensures overall supervision of the programme, making sure that the money is well spent and the expected results are achieved.

For each OP, the Member State designates a number of authorities, including an MA responsible for managing and implementing the OP in accordance with the principles of sound financial management. This includes ensuring that operations selected for funding meet the criteria applicable to the OP (Article 60(a) of the General Regulation), that implementation data are collected as required for financial management, monitoring verifications, audits and evaluations, and that OPs are evaluated in line with Article 48(3) of the General Regulation.

ESF 2007-2013 was implemented in all 28 Member States,¹² through 117 mono-fund OPs (59 in RCE regions, 42 in CONV regions and 16 multi-objective programmes covering both types of regions), with a total allocation of EUR 115.6 billion by the end of 2014, including EUR 76.8 billion from the EU budget. This contribution represented 7.9 % of the total EU budget for the period, as compared with 8.5 % in 2000-2006. National public contributions amounted to EUR 35.1 billion, complemented by an additional EUR 3.7 billion from private funds, mobilised at national level:

- a significant proportion of the ESF (58 % of the total allocation or 69 % of EU funding alone) was allocated to operations in CONV regions. 42 % of the total allocation (31 % of EU funding alone) was dedicated to RCE regions. The relative proportions of total

¹² Croatia was covered by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) from 2007 until June 2013 and an ESF programme for July-December 2013 which incorporated the previous IPA programming.

allocation and EU funding alone differ because the rate of EU co-financing is higher in CONV regions (generally up to 85 %) than in RCE regions (generally up to 50 %);

- taking both types of region together, HC investments are the largest (45.5 % of the budget), followed by investments in A2E (including adaptability with 34.3 %). SI interventions were allocated 14.3 % of the budget, leaving 2.1 % for SIC, 0.7 % for PP and 3.1 % for technical assistance.

Table 3: ESF financial allocation and implementation

	HC	A2E	SI	SIC	PP	Total
Total OP (EUR billion)	52.6	39.7	16.5	2.4	0.8	115.6
of which EU funding (EUR billion)	35.9	25.7	10.2	2.0	0.5	76.7
Allocation by policy field as % of total allocation	45.5 %	34.3 %	14.3 %	2.1 %	0.7 %	100 %
Declared expenditure as % of total allocation	78.1 %	81.1 %	83.7 %	69 %	64.2 %	79.3 %
CONV regions (EUR billion)	34.1	20.4	7.5	2.3	0.3	66.9
of which EU funding (EUR billion)	26.8	16.2	5.9	1.9	0.2	52.7
Allocation by policy field as % of total allocation	51.0 %	30.5 %	11.3 %	3.5 %	0.5 %	100 %
Declared expenditure as % of total allocation	76.4 %	82.7 %	83.4 %	68.3 %	67.0 %	78.5 %
RCE regions (EUR billion)	18.5	19.2	9	0.1	0.5	48.7
of which EU funding (EUR billion)	9.1	9.6	4.2	0.1	0.2	24.0
Allocation by policy field as % of total allocation	38.0 %	39.5 %	18.3 %	0.2 %	1.0 %	100 %
Declared expenditure as % of total allocation	81.1 %	79.3 %	84.0 %	92.0 %	62.3 %	80.4 %

By December 2014, expenditure amounting to 79.3 % of the overall ESF 2007-2013 budget had been declared to the Commission. Certain conclusions can be drawn as regards the implementation rates:

- there are considerable differences across Member States. While some (LT, EE, LV, FI, PT) reached the 95 % transfer limit, for others (particularly RO, but also SK, MT and HR) implementation rates remained comparatively low;
- overall differences between CONV and RCE regions are relatively limited, with rates of 78.5 % and 80.4 % respectively;
- implementation rates for SI, A2E and HC (ranging from 83.7 % to 78.1 %) are significantly higher than for SIC (69 %) and PP (64.2 %). This can be explained by the fact that many projects focus on the longer term and run through the entire programming period; and

- technical assistance budgets had not been fully used, with an average implementation rate across the EU of 67.9 %. This may be explained by the fact that activities aimed at system-level changes were slower, scheduled towards the end of the period and/or more challenging to implement due to their complexity.

While the programming period ended in 2013, operations could continue until 31 December 2015. MAs do not have to submit applications for payment of the final balance until 31 March 2017¹³ (see General Regulation), so implementation rates will increase further.¹⁴

3. EVALUATION CRITERIA AND QUESTIONS

Under Article 49(3) of the General Regulation, the *ex post* evaluation should:

- cover all OPs under each objective;
- examine the extent to which resources were used, the effectiveness and efficiency of programming and the socio-economic impact, in order to draw conclusions for policies on economic and social cohesion; and
- identify factors contributing to the success or failure of the implementation of OPs and identify good practices.

The following additional specific evaluation criteria were used during this *ex post* evaluation: EU added value,¹⁵ gender sensitivity,¹⁶ sustainability and lessons learned (in terms of policy choices, target groups, programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of future programmes).

The evaluation questions and criteria were used in all studies supporting this evaluation. It is important to note that the evaluation was designed well before the Commission adopted the *Better Regulation Guidelines*¹⁷, but to the extent possible the responses to the evaluation questions (see chapter 5) have been organised according to the criteria in the *Guidelines*. Socio-economic impact and gender sensitivity were presented as separate evaluation criteria to comply with the General Regulation.

4. METHOD

4.1. Methodology

For the 2007-2013 programming period, the Commission was responsible for carrying out *ex post* evaluation in close cooperation with Member States and MAs.

Based on a preparatory study¹⁸ three **thematic studies** have been carried out, focusing on:

¹³ 2018 for Croatia.

¹⁴ As of 31 May 2016, the overall implementation rate was 90.72 % (based on SFC figures).

¹⁵ Community/EU added value is defined in the *Better Regulation Guidelines* as value resulting from EU interventions that is additional to the value that would have resulted from public and private sector interventions at regional or national levels.

¹⁶ In line with the principle of equality between men and women set out in Article 16 of the General Regulation.

¹⁷ Better Regulation Guidelines COM (2015) 215, 19.5.2015

¹⁸ Preparatory study for the *ex post* evaluation of ESF 2007-2013; Panteia in association with LSE enterprise.

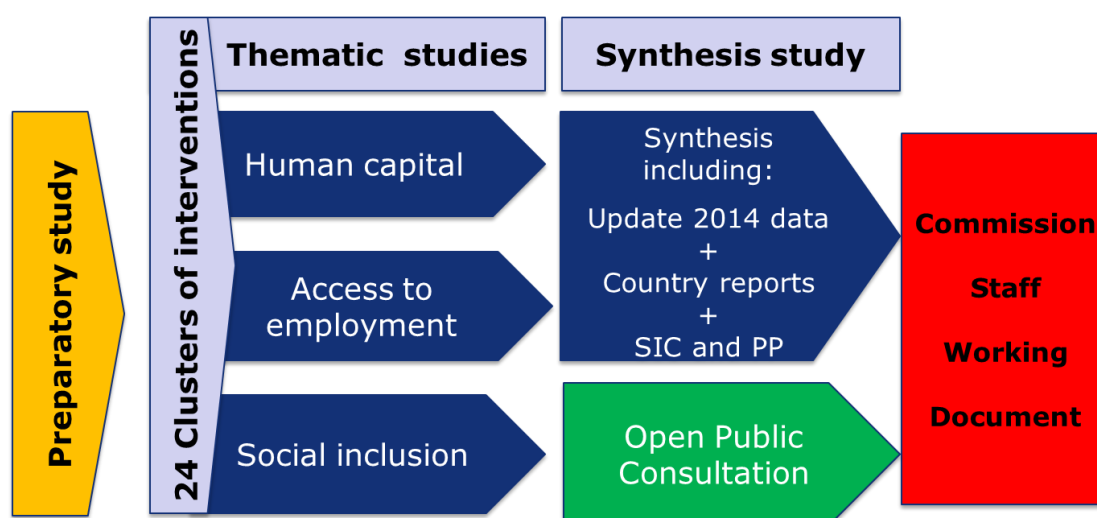
- supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society (SI);¹⁹
- investing in human capital, which includes adaptability of workers (HC);²⁰ and
- access and sustainable integration into employment (A2E).²¹

A separate synthesis study²² was produced to:

- integrate the main findings of the thematic evaluations;
- update data on the basis of the 2014 annual implementation report (AIR);
- do additional work on Croatia and the priorities with lower resource allocations (SIC and PP); and
- present country reports.

Figure below presents overview of main deliverables used for the SWD.

Figure 2: Deliverables of the ESF 2007-2013 *ex post* evaluation



This SWD is based also on the results of the **open 12-week internet-based public consultation**. Results of the consultation are presented through the section 5 and more detailed in the Annex 4. The open public consultation (OPC) was carried out after the start of the external evaluation and as such it could not contribute to the findings of that evaluation. The results of the OPC are presented throughout the SWD in order to provide additional evidence to corroborate or not the findings of the evaluation. For more comprehensive presentation of the methodology and other data sources used please refer to the Annex 5 of this document.

¹⁹ *European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society*, ICF international (2016).

²⁰ *European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital*, ICF international (2016).

²¹ *ESF 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: access and sustainable integration into employment*, Metis GmbH in association with Panteia (2016).

²² *ESF 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: synthesis*, Metis GmbH in consortium with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini and Panteia.

Interventions (or operations) within OPs under the thematic studies on A2E, HC and SI were divided for the purpose of the evaluation into **clusters** or groupings by similar type of objective, target group and/or activities supported. The clusters (see Table 4) provide a comprehensive overview of the various types of ESF activities in 2007-2013 and a basis for an in-depth analysis (based on a sample of 234 interventions) of the effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, gender sensitivity and Community added value of similar interventions across the EU. The financial coverage of the interventions assessed ranged from 10 % (SI) to 66 % (HC) of allocations, which allows us to draw valid and robust conclusions at EU level. More information on the development of the clusters is presented in Annex 5.

Table 4: Most common types of intervention (clusters)

A2E	HC	SI	SIC	PP
Support for PES and other labour market institutions	Lifelong learning (LLL) systems and frameworks	Supporting and enabling actions (debt counselling, language training for migrants, etc.)	Introducing changes to structures and processes	Improve policy coordination, design and governance
Personalised support for individuals	Quality of HE	Actions with an employment objective	Upskilling and managing human resources	Expanding Multi-actor projects
Training	Early childhood education and care	Pathway approaches	Developing tools (e-governance, etc)	Support for the capacity building of partnership (members)
Employment incentives	Quality of school education	Systematic measures influencing systems, institutional or cultural contexts		
Self-employment and entrepreneurship	Quality and labour-market relevance of VET			
Active ageing and prolonging longer working life	Reduction of early school leaving and inclusive education			
Women in employment and reducing gender-based segregation	Transition to the labour market for young people			
Increase migrant participation	Research and innovation			
Geographical and occupational mobility of workers	Professional up-skilling of employed people			
	Upskilling and requalification of adults			
	Participation and mobility of HE students			

4.2. Data used and limitations

The implementation of the programmes was not completed at the time of the *ex-post* evaluation. Therefore, the evaluation could not use the final implementation reports of the programmes and could only use the 2014 AIR data and national evaluations from the Member States. The *ex-post* evaluation is thus not presenting the full picture of the ESF during that programming period. Despite efforts to mobilise all available information, the *ex post* evaluation faced a number of limitations, regarding the design of programmes, the aggregation of data on participations, and results, the lack in some instances of predefined targets, essential data at intervention level, and robust impact evaluations from Member States. Annex 6 provides a more comprehensive presentation of data limitations and how they were dealt with in this evaluation.

As outlined in chapter 6, many of the limitations have been overcome in the new 2014-2020 regulatory framework, notably those regarding the design of programmes, aggregation of data on participations, lack of robust objectives and indicators associated to baselines, milestones and targets as well as the setting of common output and results indicators including those establishing a common approach for monitoring/reporting on the sustainability of the effects of ESF through longer term results.

5. ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

5.1. Relevance

The ESF demonstrated its relevance by close alignment of the programmes with national policies addressing country-specific challenges and priorities formulated in the employment recommendations, national reform programmes and EU policies.

In 2008 the EU-28 employment rate for age group 20-64 was 70 %, the unemployment rate was 7%, the share of 30 to 34 year olds who have attained tertiary education was 31 % and early school leave at 17%, while 117 million Europeans were at risk of poverty. As discussed in Chapter 2.1, the ESF OPs responded to the analysis of the socio-economic situation and the specific challenges identified by National Strategic Reference Frameworks at national level and at EU level by explicitly addressing relevant challenges identified by the Country Specific Recommendations. As such ESF activities were highly relevant for achieving Europe 2020 headline targets in the employment, education and social fields.

The socio-economic context in which the ESF OPs were programmed was very different from that in which they were implemented – the latter being dominated by the economic and financial crisis. In 2008 the EU-28 employment rate had fallen to 68.6 % by 2010, while unemployment rose to 9.6 % in the same period, with the deterioration of labour markets and the social situation being particularly significant in some Member States and for some groups of the population, such as young people. The ESF played an important role in mitigating the negative effects of the crisis and responding effectively to the associated emerging challenges. The alignment with EU policies and priorities was much stronger in 2007-2013 than in 2000-2006 and meant that resources were concentrated on relevant priorities.

ESF alignment with national and EU policies and priorities

The ESF Regulation was aimed at establishing a close connection between ESF programmes and EU policies and priorities. The programmes supported the implementation of national reforms responding to EU priorities under the Lisbon and the Europe 2020 strategies²³ (also in the context of the first cycles of the European Semester) and contributed to the Social Inclusion Open Method of Coordination and the 2020 Education and Training 2020 strategy:

- the ESF was highly relevant in addressing the main policy challenges in order to achieve the EU 2020 headline targets and contributing to the EU guidelines on labour market policies, social policies and education, and to the development of institutional capacity to deliver policies and reforms;²⁴ and
- the specific challenges identified by the CSRs were well reflected in the OPs. All intervention clusters identified by the thematic evaluations can be linked to at least one of the CSR key challenges.²⁵

There are considerable differences between Member States regarding priorities chosen (e.g. some chose to invest relatively little in A2E intervention, while others invested less in HC), reflecting the variety of challenges faced. Overall, RCE regions invested more in employment-related intervention, while CONV regions concentrated more on investment in HC systems (see table 3).

In the open public consultation, more respondents agreed than disagreed with the statement that the ESF programmes were designed to address key issues in the HC, A2E and SI thematic areas, while the other themes (SIC and PP) were recognised somewhat less:

- HC: 78 % agreed, 5 % disagreed;
- A2E: 79 % agreed, 5 % disagreed; and
- SI: 81 % agreed, 4 % disagreed.

Flexibility in programming and response to the crisis

The Commission took several measures in response to the financial and economic crisis. In the 2008 European Economic Recovery Plan, the ESF (as the EU's main financial instrument for investing in people) was a key part of the 'recovery toolbox'. As a result of the Plan, the Commission was able to simplify criteria for support and step up advance payments. To ensure further the use of ESF (and other structural funds) during the crisis, Member States receiving financial assistance were granted additional 10 percentage points of European co-financing. The Commission also made it possible to amend ESF expenditure programming to focus on more relevant and immediate crisis-driven needs such as short-term or public works schemes. Member State²⁶ and Commission evaluations²⁷ show that the ESF was a key tool to address

²³ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

²⁴ This alignment was recognised by the European Court of Auditors in its special report on education, conclusion 83. (*EU education objectives: programmes aligned but shortcomings in performance measurement* (special report no 16/2016))

²⁵ See Tables 1 and 2 in the ESF 2007-2013 *ex post* evaluation synthesis report.

²⁶ For example the Evaluation of quality and efficiency of trainings and employment promotion measures financed by ESF, Final Report, 16 May 2011 (Lithuania).

emerging employment and social inclusion challenges. As a result, the Community's financial contribution to the ESF OPs increased by EUR 512 million, while Member States' budgetary consolidation measures reduced the initial total allocation by EUR 3.40 billion, from EUR 119.0 billion to EUR 115.6 billion.

The flexibility in existing programmes and the possibility of reprogramming, as enshrined in the General Regulation and further strengthened through the European Economic Recovery Plan, meant that ESF programmes were able to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging challenges, in particular those created by the crisis. In all, 72 % of the programmes were adapted in response to the crisis, with financial resources being shifted to support the groups most affected and target values being revised. Shifts within PAX did not always require formal approval by the Commission and OPs with relatively broad PAX were able to shift financial allocations more easily. Overall, OPs increased their focus on fighting unemployment, shifting resources to A2E (job search, job creation, enhancing employability) and SI activities. Overall, this resulted in an increase of EUR 3.1 billion in the Community contribution to A2E and SI²⁸.

At the informal European Council in January 2012, the Commission launched an initiative to help the eight Member States with the highest levels of youth unemployment. Youth action teams composed of national and Commission officials were set up in February 2012 with Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain. As a result over 4 billion eur were reallocated to youth employment themed interventions. The European Court of auditors has noted that the difficulties to conclude on the actual effects of these efforts²⁹.

A majority (67 %) of respondents to the open public consultation agreed with the statement that the ESF helped to mitigate the effects of the crisis, while 14 % disagreed.

5.2. Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the ESF has been assessed according to various criteria, in particular whether the programmes achieved their targets, the extent to which they reached the relevant target groups of the population and whether this support produced measurable results in terms of improving the situation in the labour market and developing HC.

Overall, the respondents to the public consultation agreed that the ESF was effective in all policy areas, although less so in SIC and PP:

- HC: 72 % agreed, 6 % disagreed;
- A2E: 68 % agreed, 8 % disagreed;
- SI: 69 % agreed, 8 % disagreed;
- SIC: 35 % agreed, 11 % disagreed; and
- PP: 44 % agreed, 9 % disagreed.

²⁷ Evaluation of the reaction of the ESF to the economic and financial crisis. Final Report, Metis GmbH

²⁸ ESF Ex-Post evaluation Synthesis 2007-2013: EU Synthesis report, figure 4

²⁹ European court of auditors special report 17/2015 "Commission's support of youth action teams: redirection of ESF funding achieved, but insufficient focus on results"

Reaching target groups

The ESF reached significant numbers of EU citizens; 98.7 million participations³⁰ were recorded, in a population of 498 million in 2007. Most participants (63 %) were in CONV regions, almost twice as many as in RCE regions (37 %). In terms of policy themes, the proportions of participants were highest in HC (61 %), A2E (29 %) and SI (8 %).

The ESF has had a balanced focus on the inactive (36 % of participants), the employed (33 %) and the unemployed (30 %).

The most relevant target groups as identified in the various sets of Employment Guidelines were reached: low-skilled people (close to 40 % of participations), the inactive (31 %), young people (30 %) and the disadvantaged in general³¹ (under-reported, but at least 21 %). However, despite the policy priority given to these groups, the relative proportions of the unemployed and migrants, minorities and the disabled actually decreased over the years while that of the inactive increased.

The ESF targeted other groups to a lesser extent (ranging from 9 % to 2 %): the highly skilled, the long-term unemployed (LTU), those aged over 54 (at least 9 %) and the self-employed. The proportion of older participants seems particularly low in view of the attention given to active ageing over the period.

Overall, slightly more women participated in ESF interventions than men (51.2 million, as against 47.5 million), showing relatively balanced participation by gender (52 % versus 48 %) at EU level. However, in a number of Member States and in some policy themes, there are considerable differences in the gender balance. These generally stem from the focus of the interventions. Most typical are male-dominated HC adaptability interventions (due to higher levels of male employment in traditional industries) and female-dominated HC or SIC interventions that targeted education and social services. The in-depth analysis within the thematic studies identified some specific clusters where the gender balance could be improved (e.g. in HC, women are over-represented as regards the upskilling and qualification of adults, and the participation and mobility of HE students; men are over-represented in research and innovation, and the professional upskilling of employed people).

This assessment is in line with the responses to the open public consultation on ESF support for target groups whose needs would have otherwise been addressed insufficiently.

The ESF played an important role in the implementation of policy initiatives addressing the needs of **young people** (under 25), who account for 30.5 % of all participations (30.1 million participations). Young people made up 32 % of total participants in HC, 29 % in A2E and 28 % in SI. However, the increased EU-level policy attention on youth unemployment and the introduction of various specific youth-employment policies (such as the Youth Action Teams) between 2010 and 2013 did not always translate into greater youth participation in the second half of the programming period. Indeed, some Member States actually saw a reduction after the onset of the crisis.

³⁰ One individual may participate in several ESF funded activities, number of participations may include also indirect participations (see Annex 6)

³¹ Including minorities, migrants and the disabled.

Results of activities supporting individuals

ESF 2007-2013 achieved a significant number of positive outcomes that helped participants integrate in the labour market by getting a job or improving their employability by acquiring new skills:

- it contributed to at least 31.8 million positive results measured at individual level across all themes. Except in the case of employment results, the highest number of results for individuals (60 %) was reported in CONV regions, in line with the high level of participation in those regions;
- 9.4 million participants are reported as being in employment immediately or some time³² after the intervention (of these, at least 0.3 million became self-employed). 8.7 million participants received a qualification/certificate. 13.7 million reported other positive results, such as improving skills and competences, increased chances in the labour market, continued in education³³, or a combination of employment, qualification and other positive result (aggregating combined indicators);
- unsurprisingly, employment gains were more prominent among participants in A2E interventions (72 % of all results in this field) than those in other types of intervention. Qualification gains were more prominent in HC interventions (35 %). Other positive results were frequently reported, especially by participants in HC (55 %) and SI interventions (57 %); and
- with final results to be reported by 31 March 2017, these figures are expected to rise further towards the end of implementation, especially in the HC area (due to cohort effects).

A comparison of positive results achieved and total number of participations (where it was possible to aggregate results) shows a success rate of 44 %.³⁴ This does not significantly vary by policy theme or objective, except in the case of SI.³⁵

Member States' evaluations³⁶ show that the ESF was instrumental in providing support to groups that otherwise would not have been supported, or not to the same extent, by regular interventions, such as migrants, the disabled and members of marginalised communities (e.g. Roma). The SI thematic evaluation study³⁷ shows that, while many measured effectiveness in terms of employment, which was heavily affected by the crisis and thus saw only moderate results, the main benefits of the interventions were 'soft' outcomes, such as behavioural and attitudinal changes (increased motivation, self-esteem, etc.), which were rarely measured by

³² As each MA defined its own result indicators, the time horizon varies, generally between 3 and 24 months.

³³ Result indicators are set to measure intended change, for the most challenging groups such as drug addicts the mere continued participation in activities can be seen as success.

³⁴ These results could be linked to approximately 69 million participations across the various themes (or 70 % of participations, which equates to 73 % of the total allocation).

³⁵ In SI, RCE regions report a considerably higher success rate (66 %) than CONV regions (39%), but this is to a large extent attributed to Germany, where the increase in childcare positions was reported as a result.

³⁶ For example: Průběžná (longitudinální) evaluace dopadů OP LZZ na cílové skupiny ((longitudinal) evaluation of impacts of the OPHRE on the programme target groups); Navreme Boheme, s.r.o, 2013.

Did Latvia's Public Works Program Mitigate the Impact of the 2008-2010 Crisis? World Bank, 2014

³⁷ European Social Fund (ESF) 2007 – 2013 ex post evaluation: Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society'

Member States. The evaluations clearly stated that ESF support in the field of SI provided an opportunity to implement interventions for disadvantaged groups that were not part of regular interventions.

In the open public consultation, more respondents agreed than disagreed that ESF **support for individuals** was successful in achieving the following results:

- gaining a qualification: 77 % agreed, 4 % disagreed;
- gaining employment: 62 % agreed, 10 % disagreed;
- enhancing the skills of teachers: 55 % agreed, 9 % disagreed; and
- improving working conditions: 45 % agreed, 17 % disagreed.

Performance in achieving targets set

About 55 % of the programme result and output indicators were monitored according to a specific target based on specific changes that ESF interventions were expected to achieve. By this measure, the interventions performed well: by the end of 2014, targets for about 64 % of these indicators had been met or almost met, within a 10 % margin:

- the targets were met or exceeded for 59 % of the 1 924 **output indicators** for which they had been set and were monitored, while another 6 % showed a 90-100 % success rate. An achievement rate of less than 50 % was reported for 16 %; and
- the targets were met or exceeded for 55 % of the 1 992 **result indicators** for which they had been set and were monitored, while another 8 % showed a 90-100 % success rate.

These figures are expected to have improved substantially towards the end of 2015. The in-depth analysis of interventions in the thematic evaluations shows generally higher rates of target achievement than the aggregate rates above, e.g. the HC thematic report shows that an average of 105 % output targets were met, while the average rate for result targets was 99 %³⁸.

Overall, the coverage of the targets varied depending on the robustness of the target-setting, the type of activity, the characteristics of the target groups and the nature of the objectives set. Unfortunately, the thematic studies could not assess systematically the plausibility of the targets, but in some cases there was evidence that they were not realistic, leading to strong over- or under-performance, or that they had not been adjusted to reflect changes in the budget allocation. The crisis provoked higher-than-expected initial demand for some types of activity (leading to higher outputs) and made the integration of the most disadvantaged into the labour market more challenging, leading to under-performance in some cases.

In most cases, the evaluation shows that result indicators and targets were not, or only rarely, broken down by gender or age group. Despite the emphasis on young people in many OPs, relatively few Member States defined OP-specific indicators focusing on outputs and results for young people, so the results of interventions as regards this group could not be assessed

³⁸ The in depth interventions analysis carried out under the thematic evaluation studies indicates that across all fields, as a result of the crisis, the demand for ESF activities increased and more participants were supported than initially planned. However the crisis also made achieving of results such as employment more challenging.

specifically. An assessment of interventions with a specific focus on gender issues was not possible for the same reason.

Results of support for systems and organisations

The wide diversity of activities funded by the ESF in support of systems and organisations makes it difficult to undertake meaningful analysis at EU level, but the evaluation did establish some quantitative and qualitative findings.

Results of activities supporting systems or organisations typically relate to the number of entities (e.g. enterprises, administrations, NGOs) established or benefiting from a positive result, and to products, education programmes or tools developed. Overall, at least 276 000 entities were supported and at least 109 000 products reported.

In the open public consultation, more respondents agreed than disagreed that ESF **support for organisations** was successful in achieving the following results:

- developing new qualifications, courses, training programmes, standards or systems: 74 % agreed, 6 % disagreed;
- improving the competitiveness and adaptability of enterprises: 50 % agreed, 10 % disagreed;
- supporting start-ups: 47 % agreed, 8 % disagreed; and
- improving public administration effectiveness and/or efficiency: 43 % agreed, 18 % disagreed.

In **HC**, there is evidence in some Member States of impacts in terms of reducing early school leaving rates, overcoming skills mismatches, improved teaching and learning methods, the creation of centres of excellence, researcher mobility, the introduction of dual VET systems, improved governance structures in VET systems (including cooperation between enterprises, PESs, chambers of commerce and schools/other training providers) and improving the image of the VET system³⁹.

In **A2E**, the cluster on support to PESs and other labour market institutions proved very successful, thanks to the special emphasis on flexibility, IT development, cooperation with social partners and multi-level governance. ESF interventions aimed at systems were often the starting point for the development of new and existing services which were then integrated into the everyday running of the PESs. In some cases, e.g. in Italy (Calabria) and Spain (Cataluña), systems developed in one region were later mainstreamed in other regions.

³⁹ •For a more detailed presentation please refer to the respective thematic report e.g. "European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital"

Table 5: Headline figures for ESF: participation and results

	HC	A2E	SI	SIC	PP	Total
Participations (in million persons)	60.3	28.9	7.8	1.4	0.1	98.7
Employed	25.6	4.6	1.4	1.4	0.1	33
of which self-employed	1.9	0.4	0.1	0	0	2.4
Unemployed	6.4	19.9	3.7	0	0	30
of which LTU	1.6	5.4	1.9	0	0	9
Inactive	28.3	4.4	2.8	0	0	35.6
Women	31.3	14.7	4.2	0.9		51.2
Young people (16-24)	19.4	8.4	2.2	0.1	0	30.1
Older people (55-64)	3.1	2.3	0.5	0.2	0	6.1
Disadvantaged	7.6	9.3	4.2	0.1	0	21.2
Low-skilled (ISCED 1-2)	24	11.2	3.6	0	0	38.9
Aggregated results						
Participants gaining employment, including self-employed (millions)	1.9	6.6	0.9	0	0	9.4
Participants gaining a qualification (millions)	6.4	1.2	0.6	0.5	0	8.7
Participants benefiting from other positive results (millions)	10.2	1.4	2	0.1	0	13.7
Total results for participants	18.5	9.2	3.5	0.6	0	31.8
Entities supported (thousands)	254	19	1	2	0	276
Products (thousands)	53	54	0	2	0	109
Minimum success rates for participants (73 % of allocation; 70 % of all participations)	46 %	38 %	52 %			44 %
Gaining employment	10 %	72 %	26 %			
Gaining a qualification	35 %	13 %	17 %			
Other positive results	55 %	15 %	57 %			

Activities aimed at modernising institutions to support activation were analysed under cluster no 4 of the **SI** thematic evaluation. These interventions helped to identify intermediate labour market institutions, encourage better local cooperation and establish services to assess the ability of disabled individuals to work and advise them on their labour market re-integration.

The thematic evaluation on **SIC** indicates that the ESF was successful in helping to reduce administrative burdens and costs for citizens and businesses (e.g. by shortening the processing time for documents, obtaining the necessary paperwork for starting a business. (e.g. ESF helped to reduce the time to set-up business to 3 days, from 61 in SI and 26 in LT) and reducing the length of judicial procedures (in SI the average duration for judicial procedures was reduced from 9.5 to 3.9 months, while in the CZ the length of judicial proceedings was down to 497 days from an initial baseline of 1,057), making services more accessible (through the introduction of online service delivery at various administrative levels: BG, PL, SI, CZ) or contributing to better-quality policies and legislation (e.g. in PL and HU). In other cases results were mixed, for example in Poland, although the share of cases handled by the courts for longer than 12 months decreased to 14% (target 13.30%, baseline 16.7%), the indicators related to the average duration of proceedings in commercial cases did not show a progress towards the set target.

The thematic evaluation on **PP** shows various successful partnerships that proved to be beneficial for stakeholders by tackling direct challenges (improving the labour-market relevance of curricula or the alignment of employment, education and social policies, or supporting sustained networks or new structures of cooperation and communication), contributing to putting issues on the policy agenda and improving mutual learning and the exchange of good practices.

Factors leading to success or failure

The evaluation assessed which types of intervention were more, or less, successful on the basis of outputs, financial implementation, number of participations and implementation. Overall, HC, SI and A2E interventions targeting individuals were more successful than those supporting systems, which take longer to bear fruit. Fewer data and evaluations were available for systems support than for support to individuals (at both OP and intervention level).

The in-depth analysis of interventions identified a series of factors specific to each policy theme that enhanced the success of operations. Some are also cross-cutting in nature, such as:

- designing and implementing individualised/customised/tailored approaches to the needs of individuals, target groups or organisations;
- taking account of the broader political context and alignment with national and EU strategies;
- ensuring ESF delivery bodies' implementation capacity; and
- the need to showcase successful interventions.

It was difficult to identify good practices in successful programme and project implementation, due to the limited information collected by MAs on interventions and the factors that made for success across all evaluation criteria. Evidence was scarce in the interventions analysed in depth, especially in terms of follow-up to the activities after funding ended. Sometimes, too little was done to communicate what worked well or less well and to build on earlier experience, and more could have been done to showcase successful interventions. Good practices stemming from the in-depth analysis are identified and reported in detail in the three thematic studies.

Table 6 presents the more successful interventions and their success factors based on the analysis of clusters (see table 4) of the 234 interventions analysed in-depth under the thematic evaluations studies.

Table 6: Successful interventions and success factors

	More successful interventions	Success factors
HC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – reducing early school leaving – transition to the labour market for young people – participation in higher education – upskilling of adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – attractive learning offer (including a vocational training component and e-learning for young learners and training clearly linked to the labour-market needs for adults) – support integrated and holistic but flexible support measures (including career advice and counselling) and meet a real identified need of the target groups
A2E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – support for PESs and other labour market institutions – personalised support (counselling, guidance) – training (especially in working environments) – migrant participation (particularly through personalised support and addressing prejudices and social barriers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – include tailored approaches focusing the intervention on the specific needs of the target group – identify personal situations and needs at the outset and then create individually adjusted actions – using the experience and knowledge of institutions working closely with the target group, as their cumulated knowledge about the target groups helps better target the actions – including work-based learning – combining wage incentives with other measures
SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – pathway approaches⁴⁰ – direct employment – system interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting tailored and individualised approaches – aligning interventions with the needs identified by local and national institutions and other stakeholders – ensuring follow-up support after ESF and ensuring the mainstreaming of successful intervention in regular policies – ensuring synergies with other activities (e.g. supporting services; multifaceted interventions) – supporting disadvantaged individuals who are not yet, or no longer, eligible for unemployment benefit
SIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – projects aimed at reducing administrative burdens for citizens and business – projects aimed at enhancing accessibility of services – projects aimed at ensuring better quality policies and legislation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ensuring political backing and support for SIC interventions – strengthening mutual learning between actors – actively promoting and supporting networking – exchange of experience and good practices between stakeholders
PP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – development of capacities – creation of networks and new services, tools, methodologies and products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – connecting and harmonising PP better with national strategies – improving competences of MAs/implementing bodies in managing the PP – improving Member State capacities to develop concepts on partnerships – better take into account the different needs at different stages of the organisations' development

Table 7 presents the less successful interventions and the bottlenecks faced. It is important to acknowledge that many types of less successful interventions usually require more time to produce results and that many such interventions were not completed at the time of the evaluation. Overall, the capacity of organisations implementing the ESF was the key success factor⁴¹ as well as the continued relevance and continued political support. For more detailed information, please refer to the Volume III of the relevant thematic report.

⁴⁰ Pathway approaches represent gradual "pathway" effort to move ever closer and finally into employment of groups that are at a distance to the labour market.

⁴¹ e.g. European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital

Table 7: Less successful interventions

	Less successful interventions	Bottlenecks
HC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – LLL system activities – VET quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – more systemic interventions require long lead-time for implementing change – extensive coordination is required among stakeholders on the design and delivery of effective training programmes
A2E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – self-employment and entrepreneurship – employment incentives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – self-employment and start-up support are among the more expensive interventions and generate little additional employment – employment incentives risk substitution and displacement effects⁴²
SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting and enabling actions (targeting more disadvantaged categories with short term interventions such as language courses for migrants) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – reallocation of resources to other groups and/or interventions, as a reaction to the crisis – increased distance from the labour market for the most disadvantaged as a result of the crisis
SIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – all types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lack of support for change from project implementers or political hierarchy – insufficient capacity of beneficiaries may result in low absorption or non-eligibility leading to ‘capacity traps’ – in turn, high proportion of abandoned projects and low absorption of funds across all intervention types
PP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – partnership not embedded in the context of decision-making or based on top-down approaches – support provided on very small scale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – insufficient (administrative, policy and financial) capacity for contribution by all partners – long time for ‘take-off’

Despite the data limitations faced, the ex-post evaluation has allowed to produce much stronger evidence on target groups reached, results achieved, success factors and bottlenecks by type of intervention of the ESF compared with what could be produced by the 2000-2006 *ex-post* evaluation. Overall, thanks to the triangulation of sources, it is possible to conclude that the interventions were generally effective in reaching the right target groups, integrating people into the labour market, improving their skills and generating changes in systems

5.3. Efficiency

The efficiency of ESF interventions is influenced by local conditions, the type of intervention and how ESF is used in Member States. It is therefore difficult to make any general assessment. However, the evidence points to a need to simplify procedures further and continue to reduce administrative burdens in management and control systems.

The average cost per participant for all interventions across the EU (obtained by dividing expenditure by number of participations⁴³) was EUR 897. Such calculations should be treated with caution, as they do not take account of other outputs stemming from support for systems and organisations. HC interventions cost less than the average (EUR 681 per participant), A2E interventions cost on average EUR 1 113 per participant and SI actions EUR 1 763. For the purposes of comparison, national active labour market policy (ALMP) data indicate a much higher cost per person (EUR 5 600 for 2007-2013).⁴⁴ Costs per participant are higher for groups

⁴² Supported (subsidised) employees may be used to replace employees in the regular labour market

⁴³ See section 4.2 on limitations regarding data on number of participations

⁴⁴ Calculation based on 2007-2013 Eurostat data on the costs per participant of ALMP type 2-7.

that have specific needs (such as the self-employed and entrepreneurs) or who are particularly disadvantaged (e.g. SI clusters for supporting and enabling actions: EUR 3 092; systemic measures: EUR 5 771).

The costs of obtaining a positive result were also calculated for a number of individual PAX. They are highest for 'system-type' interventions, such as upskilling adults or enhancing VET quality.

Beyond the obvious differences in purchasing parity, there is insufficient evidence to attribute the considerable differences in cost per participant across Member States (or result where available) to different levels of efficiency in implementation. One reason underlying the variation is the different role of ESF investments in the Member States. Some Member States use the ESF to fund national policies or to supplement national schemes with additional features, while in others it is used almost exclusively to develop innovative approaches, which tend to be more expensive per participant.

In the open public consultation, many respondents agreed with the statement that the ESF was cost-effective in the five policy areas of intervention, although less so for SIC and PP:

- HC: 59 % agreed, 11 % disagreed;
- A2E: 51 % agreed, 13 % disagreed;
- SI: 59 % agreed, 9 % disagreed;
- SIC: 33 % agreed, 15 % disagreed; and
- PP: 39 % agreed, 10 % disagreed.

The respondents judged that most administrative requirements (as regards communication, implementation of projects, the designation of authorities, OP design, project selection and evaluation) were appropriate. The administrative requirements most often deemed 'excessive' were audits (38 % of respondents), the set-up of management and control systems (37 %) and reporting (36 %).

The Delivery Systems work package of the ex-post evaluation of the Cohesion policy⁴⁵ found that the administrative burden in project selection and implementation was high. In particular, this was because of complex internal administrative rules causing delays in project selection, and public procurement procedures. The proportionality of the requirements and controls was questioned more in non-cohesion countries, where programmes tend to be smaller. This evaluation identifies two main drivers of high administrative workload:

- *strict documentation requirements*

While ensuring the correct handling of timesheets, the retention of documentation for each payment for a long period of time, regardless of the amount, causes considerable expense and stress during project implementation. Such procedures affect the capacity of those concerned (especially NGOs with limited capacity) to manage the process and may impact activities by diverting resources from activities that are necessary to those

⁴⁵ This work package, conducted in the framework of the ERDF and Cohesion Fund ex-post evaluation organised by DG Regional and Urban Policy, also covered ESF
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/pdf/expost2013/wp12_final_report.pdf

that are easier to carry out. The evaluation recommends more widespread application of the simplified cost options (SCOs), greater use of electronic storage and the exchange of documents to remedy these issues; and

- *high number of controls and audits*

Although still perceived as excessive, the implementation of the single-audit principle and the resultant increased role of national audit authorities were credited with the significant reduction of error rates as compared with the previous programming period. However, the evaluation found that much of the administrative burden was a result of implementation problems stemming from incomplete application of the principle, leading to multiple controls at various levels, but also contradictory interpretations of the regulations and a lack of capacity at management level. It also points to the potential of more widespread risk-based approaches to management verification and audits to reduce costs further and to minimise administrative burden.

It is worth noting that the simplified cost Options (SCOs) introduced in 2007-2013 (flat-rate financing, standard scales of unit costs and lump sums) actually covered only 7 % of total expenditure. Such a rate of take-up may be considered insufficient. The main obstacles identified in the survey of MAs⁴⁶ were legal uncertainty and a fear of potentially large financial impacts of financial corrections in the event of systematic errors.

By 31 December 2014, a total of 53 Financial Engineering Instruments (FEIs)⁴⁷ under ESF OPs had been set up in seven Member States (DE, DK, EE, IT, LT, LV and PL). The OPs contributed a total of EUR 829.2 million to several financial instruments in support of the self-employed, long-term unemployed and women, including EUR 461.7 million (0.6 % of the total ESF budget) from the ESF itself. Although strengthened during the programming period, reporting arrangements for FEI implementation remained fragmented, without giving full information on the use of the funds and supporting administrative arrangements. After a slow start, the disbursement of funds to end recipients increased over the last years of implementation, even if in some cases the risk of non-absorption of FEI resources remains.

5.4. Gender sensitivity

In ESF 2007-2013 programming, Member States applied the principles of gender equality in a cross-cutting way in their OPs. However, this approach sometimes replaced more specific actions on gender sensitivity. Most interventions, across various policy themes, claimed to be gender-neutral, but did not include specific actions directly addressing gender sensitivity as such. Few interventions were identified that focused on improving the overall position of women in the labour market. Despite the increased emphasis on mainstreaming gender considerations in this programming period, there is insufficient evidence to assess the inclusion of gender equality in intervention design, objectives and target groups or concrete programme contribution to gender equality issues.

⁴⁶ <http://www.cc.cec/Ares/ext/documentInfoDetails.do?documentId=080166e5a40d1421>

⁴⁷ *Summary of data on the progress made in financing and implementing FEIs reported by the MAs in accordance with Article 67(2)(j) of the General Regulation, DG EMPL, DG REGIO (September 2015).*

5.5. Sustainability

In 2007-2013, there was no common approach to assessing the sustainability of ESF interventions for individuals.⁴⁸ There was considerable variation in observed sustainability, with results ranging from 20 % to 91 % in SI and HC, depending on the nature of the intervention and the target group. Available data from the in-depth analysis and Member States' evaluations, mainly for A2E interventions, show the ESF's potential to contribute to sustainable results for individuals. Systematic follow-up of individual results in other thematic areas, such as lasting improvements of skills and competences, is rare and does not provide sufficient evidence to draw conclusions.

Mixed results were found for the sustainability of results for interventions targeting systems.⁴⁹ One-off efforts to increase the quality of education are often limited in terms of sustainability, as their success is highly dependent on specific follow-up. However, interventions focusing on LLL systems or staff training achieved more sustainable results. Factors that were found to contribute to the sustainability of the interventions themselves across the Member States are:

- the conversion of new working relations into lasting networks;
- the sharing of lessons learned;
- the adoption of common approaches; and
- the mainstreaming of approaches.

5.6. Coherence

The General Regulation (Article 9) required ESF assistance to be consistent with the Community's activities, policies and priorities and to complement its other financial instruments. Accordingly, an effort was made at the programming stage to align OP objectives with national priorities through common national reference frameworks based on common Community strategic guidelines. The ESF's consistency with EU policies and priorities was discussed extensively in section 2.1. The evaluation has found a particularly strong alignment of ESF with the priorities identified under the country specific recommendations.

The ESF coherence and complementarity with other EU financial instruments, notably in the areas of education, research and support for the integration of non-EU immigrants, were examined during the programming phase and OPs showed how they were achieved. However, they were not considered explicitly in the design of the *ex post* evaluation⁵⁰.

Overall, respondents in the public consultation agreed that the ESF complemented (and was therefore coherent with) other EU funds:

- HC: 45 % agreed, 13 % disagreed;
- A2E: 40 % agreed, 13 % disagreed;

⁴⁸ 'Sustainability of results for individuals' measures whether the effects of the ESF on individuals lasted a period of time (e.g. six months, a year) after the support ends.

⁴⁹ 'Sustainability of results for systems and organisations' measures whether the changes supported were still in operation or implemented sometime after the end of the support.

⁵⁰ The coherence criteria was introduced by the Better Regulation guidelines while the evaluation studies were already commissioned and ongoing

- SI: 39 % agreed, 13 % disagreed;
- SIC: 27 % agreed, 11 % disagreed; and
- PP: 33 % agreed, 10 % disagreed.

However, the question as to complementarity with other funds was not answered by up to a third of the respondents by policy field, indicating that many appeared not to have experience of other funds. This complementarity was perceived most often in HC and A2E, but also in SI, SIC and PP.

Despite alignment at programming level, the thematic evaluations found few examples of actual inter-programme coordination at operational level between interventions under the ESF and other structural funds or EU programmes. In some Member States, there was no link at all. The exceptions found were in the field of entrepreneurship and in HC, where there was some coordination with ERDF programmes. Some cases of complementarity with ERDF/CF were noted, in particular in the HC thematic evaluation:⁵¹ the ERDF/CF contribution to Latvia's VET infrastructure was accompanied by ESF-financed interventions designed to increase the attractiveness of vocational education. Similarly, in Italy, ERDF/CF investment in new education technologies was accompanied by ESF investment in new teaching methods.

Such evidence of a lack of coordination on the ground is consistent with the findings of the 2000-2006 ESF *ex post* evaluation.

5.7. EU added value

To analyse EU added value, the evaluation used a wider framework extending beyond what could be achieved by Member States at national and/or regional levels. This framework helps to establish better the extent to which the ESF was additional to national funding and programmes, and the ways in which the support helped reform and improve national systems. While it was not always possible to quantify the effects (see Annex 6 on limitations), their significance was established using a systematic set of criteria in each case. The results of the assessment are in line with the public consultation, where on average 50 % agreed that the ESF brought EU added value and 13 % disagreed.

EU value of the ESF:

- 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; and
- process effects*: ESF action influences Member-State administrations and organisations involved in the programmes.

⁵¹ *European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital*, ICF international (2016).

The evaluation concluded that ESF programmes generated all four forms of EU added value. The most visible are the volume and scope effects, but the role and process effects are also visible and significant.

Table 8: Overview of EU added value by effects⁵²

Member State	HC				A2E				SI			
	Volume	Scope	Role	Process	Volume	Scope	Role	Process	Volume	Scope	Role	Process
AT	+		+	+	+		+	++	+	+	+	++
BE	+				+	+	+	+	++	++	+	+
BG	++	++	++	+	++	+	++	+	++		+	
CY	+			+					++		+	+
CZ	++	+	+	+	+	+			++		+	+
DE	+	+	+	+		++	+	++	+	+	+	+
DK	+		+	+	+	+	+	+				
EE		+	+	+	++		++	+	+	+	+	
EL	+		+	+	++	+	+		++	+		
ES	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+
FI	+		+	+	+		+	+	+		+	+
FR	++	+	+	+	+	+			+		+	+
HU	++	+	+	+	++		+	+	+		+	+
IE	+					+			+		+	+
IT	+	+	+	+	++			+	+	+	+	+
LU						+	+		+		+	
LV	++	++	++	+	++	+		+	+		+	+
LT	++	++	+	+	++	++	+	+	+	++	+	+
MT	++	+	+	+		+			+	++	+	+
NL	++			+		+	+	+	+		+	+
PL	++	++	+	+	++	+	+	+	++	+	+	++
PT	++	+	+	+		+			+	+	+	
RO	++	+		++	++	+	+	+	++	++		
SE	+		+			++	+	+	+	+	+	+
SI	++				++	+	+		+	+	+	+
SK	++	+		+	++	+	+	+	++	+		+
UK	+			+	+	+	+		+	+		

Volume effects were the largest effects across all policy themes, as the ESF provided a significant financial contribution to implement national policies addressing employment and social challenges in a majority of Member States. The significance of ESF investments in relation to national funding varies substantially across countries, particularly between more and less developed Member States, where the ESF is most relevant:

- high significance: BG, CZ, EE, EL, HR, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, and SK;
- some significance: BE, CY, DE, ES, FR, HU, IT and UK;

⁵² ESF Ex-Post evaluation Synthesis 2007-2013: EU Synthesis report, National synthesis reports.

- low significance: AT, DK, FI, IE, LU, NL and SE.

Overall, the significance of the ESF was highest in the area of ALMPs. A2E expenditure compared to national ALMP expenditure was above 70% for 8 Member States (BG, EE, EL, LV, LT, MT, RO, SK) while it was less than 10% for 11 Member States (AT, BE, CY, DE, DK, FI, FR, IE, LU, NL, SE) in remaining 9 Member States ESF had medium significance. Similarly, SI expenditure also may be compared to national ALMP expenditure, as it often funds activities of the same nature. ESF investment in SI was above 70% compared to national ALMP financing for 7 Member States (BG, CY, CZ, EL, HR, RO, SK) while below 4% for 13 Member States (AT, DK, EE, ES, FI, IE, IT, LT, LU, MT, NL, SE, UK).

In the area of HC, the relative importance of ESF contribution was highest for PT, CZ, where it made up more than 5% of all national education and training expenditure (excluding primary education). For 10 Member States ESF investment in HC reached 2-5 % (BG, EE, HU, LT, LV, MT, PL, RO, SI, SK), while for 16 Member States ESF SI investment contributed less than 2% of the national expenditure on E&T expenditure⁵³. Even in countries where the ESF's contribution in a given policy field was less significant, the evaluation identified sub-areas, particularly in HC, where there were important volume effects, e.g. in school education, early school leaving and transition to the labour market. For example, while the Italian country report⁵⁴ indicates that HC investment in Italy constituted 1.3 % of the national funding for education, the ESF provided up to 80 % of the financing for public training activities.

In the context of the crisis, national resources allocated to the interventions would have been lower in the absence of the ESF, especially in those Member States with severe national budget restrictions following the crisis, as explained in chapter 5.1.

ESF 2007-2013 also provided added value by *broadening the scope* of existing national interventions. By making use of ESF interventions, Member States were able to offer more tailored and intensive services to specific target groups, such as people with disabilities, young people at risk of early school leaving and unemployed people with low qualifications. These groups would otherwise have had no access to such services or access to mainstream services only. Further, some successful interventions were taken up in mainstream policy, e.g. in Belgium, France, Italy and Sweden. In SI, the ESF investment helped to reach new target groups not covered by existing provisions (EE, EL, ES, MT, PL, PT). Further, in many other countries, it contributed to strengthening or expanding the existing service offer for specific groups (for instance in CY, IT, DE, FR).

Value added of ESF in the HC policy field:

In the field of education, Member States used the ESF to address a wide number of the CSRs supporting reforms, to increase participation in education and training, to improve the quality of education and training systems and change some education delivery mechanisms, to address the particular HC needs of certain target groups and to respond to the challenges posed by the economic crisis.

⁵³ Annex IV of the ESF 2007-2013 synthesis report

⁵⁴ ESF Ex-post Evaluation Synthesis 2007-2013 Contract VC/2015/0098, Country Report – Italy

The thematic evaluations provide many instances where ESF activities were used as a model to test new and innovative provision that were subsequently mainstreamed nationally⁵⁵. ESF 2007-2013 contributed to *changing the role of public services*, such as PES and educational institutions, and more generally improving delivery systems, particularly in the areas of HC and PP. In HC, ESF was used to test and implement new and innovative activities at local, regional or national level and provided EU added value through the introduction of new ways for education stakeholders to work together or pedagogical innovations in the curriculum and delivery of learning in 25 Member States (except IE, NL and SI). These effects were particularly prominent in CONV regions where administrative reforms were supported by the ESF under SIC interventions. In the open public consultation, many respondents agreed that the ESF facilitated the testing and implementation of innovative activities in these policy areas:

- HC: 60 % agreed, 9 % disagreed;
- A2E: 57 % agreed, 11 % disagreed;
- SI: 59 % agreed, 11 % disagreed;
- SIC: 36 % agreed, 12 % disagreed; and
- PP: 37 % agreed, 10 % disagreed.

Examples quoted included skills pipelines, e-services, new channels for communicating with participants, and mobile social workers.

The evaluation shows that ESF interventions added value in terms of *process* effects. Most interventions in the field of PP and SIC were dedicated specifically to changing ways of working. Interventions in A2E contributed to the adoption of systemic reforms and administrative capacity-building in public services, such as PES and educational institutions, mainly in CONV regions. The ESF contributed to establishment of successful partnerships facilitating co-operation between and raising the capacity of various public sector actors, as well as between the public sector, the private sector and NGOs. These measures mainly focussed around the upgrading of the operation of labour market institutions (e.g. CY, DE, EL, FR, HU, MT); addressing discrimination and awareness raising on equal opportunities (e.g. ES, EL, FI, LT) or the social economy (e.g. LT, PL)⁵⁶. In the field of HC, the ESF was used to fund a range of reforms, ranging from improvements in the quality of lifelong learning (BG, FR), measures to improve teacher training (BG, CZ), the introduction of new management and evaluation methods in initial education (BG, IT), changes to the management, quality assurance and definition of study programmes in HE (BG, DE, CZ, IT, MT) and introduction of measures to improve the quality and structures of VET (CZ, IT, MT, PL)⁵⁷.

In the open public consultation, many respondents agreed that the ESF was instrumental in supporting structural reforms in the five policy areas, in particular in schools, local authority educational structures and healthcare.

⁵⁵ European Social Fund (ESF) 2007 – 2013 ex post evaluation: Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society’ Volume 1

⁵⁶ European Social Fund (ESF) 2007 – 2013 ex post evaluation: Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society’, Volume 1

⁵⁷ European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital, Volume 1

5.8. Socio-economic impact

The ESF had socio-economic impacts, to varying degrees, at three levels: micro (effects on individuals and organisations), meso (effects on systems) and macro (effects on macroeconomic aggregates).

Section 5.2 showed the extent of the **microeconomic** effects through the large number of people participating in the ESF and the results achieved, but also that the ESF invests in policy fields where there are development needs (see also section 2.1). HC activities received a larger budget share in CONV regions than in RCE regions (51 % vs 38 %) and more participations (43 million vs 17 million), resulting in over 6 million qualifications, as against 2.6 million in RCE regions. A2E activities were more important for RCE regions, with more participations (16 million vs 13 million in CONV regions) and recorded 5.9 million employment results, as against 3.5 million in CONV regions. A further illustration is provided by the coverage of participants by educational level: the ESF reached 21 % of students at ISCED level 4, 8 % at level 3, 6 % at levels 1 and 2, and 6 % at levels 5 and 6.

Member States have made limited use of CIEs⁵⁸ to ascertain the impact of the ESF on individual participants. Where CIEs have been carried out, they have found that ESF interventions were more effective than national interventions or the absence of any services (e.g. the results of ESF activities in Finland were found to be generally comparable to national results, despite the fact that more disadvantaged target groups were targeted).⁵⁹ To promote impact evaluations, the Commission granted financial support for eight pilot projects conducting CIEs of a wide range of ESF interventions in the areas of ALMP and vocational training. Some of the evaluations were able to establish robust conclusions:⁶⁰

- the evaluation of the causal effect of the Portugal's *Convocatorias* activation scheme found that the probability of transition into employment doubled from 4 % to 8 % for the unemployed participants, as compared with similar non-participants. It also estimated that the programme had a positive financial impact of EUR 240 million over the first year of operation;
- the evaluations of some Italian, Spanish and Portuguese support schemes for young unemployed people concluded that training for the young generally increased their employability and the number of weeks worked per year;
- the evaluation of hiring incentives schemes in Italy and Lithuania concluded that these policies increased the duration of employment, but at high costs;
- the evaluation of a reform in Portugal that introduced vocational training into the upper secondary school curriculum increased educational attainment and reduced school dropout rates, but lowered the chances of students going on to university; and

⁵⁸ Counterfactual Impact Evaluation compares the outcomes of those having benefitted from a programme with those similar in all respects to the treatment group not benefiting.

⁵⁹ *Työvoimapolitiisilta toimenpiteiltä sijoittuminen vuonna 2010*, TEM-analyysejä 42/2012 [*Placements from ALMP in 2010*, Ministry of Employment and the Economy analysis 42/2012], Sihto M, Tuomaala M, Sardar P.

⁶⁰ *Synthesis report on pilot projects to carry out ESF-related counterfactual impact evaluations*, Leandro Elia, Giulia Santangelo, Sylke V. Schnepf, JRC-DDG1 (2015);

<http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=67&langId=en&newsId=2571>.

- the general training policies evaluated in the Estonian and Lithuanian pilots did not have significant causal effects on labour market chances.

As regards effects at **meso** level, section 5.7 provided extensive examples of support for the *modernisation, strengthening and widening of the scope of public services* such as PESs and other ALMP institutions and support for health and safety measures at work⁶¹. Thematic reports point also to more horizontal support for reforms in healthcare, where, for example, ESF supported reforms in the disability assessment system (CY), education of the healthcare professionals (LV, IT) as well as deinstitutionalization of care (BG), helping integration of people with disabilities (CY, LT, RO, SK, UK) and addictions (LT, UK) into society and labour force⁶². As noted in the 6th Cohesion Report,⁶³ strengthening administrative capacity is critical, since high growth rates and regional economic convergence cannot be achieved without good governance. The SIC thematic evaluation found concrete examples of the ESF's contribution to administrative capacity-building in some specific areas:

- it helped to reduce the length of judicial proceedings, as observed in SI and CZ (cf. chapter 5.2).
- it supported expansion of the number of services offered via e-government in SI, BG, PL and CZ, and reduction of the administrative burden for companies in SI, PL and LT; and
- in Poland, it helped fund simplifications to 92 legal acts and the creation of one-stop shops for start-ups, raised the quality of tax administration services and equipped the judiciary with skills for dealing with economic cases.

At **macroeconomic** level, simulations using the Quest III and RHOMOLO models,⁶⁴ on the impact of the HC investments show positive effects in terms of GDP (+0.25 %) and productivity. These effects are much stronger in the EU-12 (+1.5 %), but they are also positive for the EUR-15 (+0.2 %). The gains in GDP are apparent in the medium term, but they are significant and highly persistent in the long term, since they interact positively with the accumulation of physical capital and technology. It should be borne in mind that such broad macro-level developments take time to materialise and are influenced by many other macro-level developments.

There were few national evaluations attempting to establish macro-level impacts. Bulgaria's evaluation linked the ESF contribution to a 1.6 % increase in employment, a 1.1 % decrease in unemployment and a 0.8 % boost to GDP.⁶⁵ The Lithuanian authorities attempted to estimate the impact on the basis of constructed socio-economic indicators encompassing employment, health, education and other factors. However the evaluation⁶⁶ found it difficult to isolate the contribution of the structural funds in preventing the deterioration of these indicators as a result of the crisis.

⁶¹ •European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital

⁶² •ESF 2007-2013 Ex post Evaluation: Access and sustainable integration into employment

⁶³ *6th report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*, European Commission (2014).

⁶⁴ WP14a: *The impact of cohesion policy 2007-2013: model simulations with Quest III – final report*;
WP14b: *The impact of cohesion policy 2007-2013: model simulations with RHOMOLO*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (April 2016).

⁶⁵ *National strategic report for Bulgaria, 2012*.

⁶⁶ *Counterfactual impact evaluation of ESF-funded active labour market measures in Lithuania*, PPMI 2014.

The deterioration of the unemployment levels initiated in 2008 continued until the year 2014, when both the number unemployed and the unemployment rate (at 10%) started to decrease and the employment rate to increase (at 69.2%). However, employment participation rates of population aged 15-64 increased continuously throughout the programming period from 70.7% to 72.3% in 2014. Despite the difficulty of establishing any statistically significant correlation between changes in the employment rate, education indicators and the proportion of ESF investments, the thematic evaluations conducted at European level confirm that the ESF played a positive role in helping to improve Member States' performance in achieving the Europe 2020 targets for smart and sustainable growth. Considerable improvements were seen over the period in the area of education at EU28 level: in 2014, the rates of early school leaving decreased by 3 percentage points compared to 2008, HE attainment rates increased by 7 percentage points over the same period and gender gaps in the key education and training indicators narrowed. In addition, expenditure on R&D increased, albeit minimally (by 0.2 percentage points). In the field of SI, there was a significant decrease in the rates of people at risk of poverty in EU-12 countries (though an increase in some old Member States due to the economic crisis). This is the only area in which a significant correlation was found between change in the rates of poverty and social exclusion and the proportion of ESF investments in SI.

Overall, the role of ESF was more prominent in the regions eligible under the Convergence objective. For example, in Bulgaria, the ESF was used to target a broad set of EU 2020 objectives and CSRs. Almost all pupils in schools participated in activities designed to reduce early school leaving and most of the VET sector received ESF assistance thus contributing to reduction in ESL from 15 % in 2008 to 13 % in 2014 in Bulgaria. A large number of university-level students were supported by the ESF, contributing to the increase in the level of tertiary educational attainment from 27% in 2008 to 31% in 2014. The ESF enabled reforms in PES, allowing more targeted support for Roma and other disadvantaged groups contributing to social inclusion. Over the programming period, there was marked decrease of number people at risk of poverty in BG, with half a million people improving their relative prosperity. ESF supported the majority of participants in ALMP measures (however labour market participation in BG decreased in 2014 compared to 2008 by 6%), provided assistance to R&D activities (R&D expenditure rose from 0.4% of GDP in 2008 to 0.8% in 2014) and supported state capacity building (including in the judiciary). The case of Bulgaria is an example of the important role played by ESF in the convergence of Member States and regions whose development was lagging behind by improving conditions for growth and employment.

Finally, more respondents agreed than disagreed with the statement that the ESF interventions contributed to **strengthening economic and social cohesion** in the five policy areas.

- HC: 72 % agreed, 6 % disagreed;
- A2E: 68 % agreed, 8 % disagreed;
- SI: 69 % agreed, 8 % disagreed;
- SIC: 35 % agreed, 11 % disagreed; and
- PP: 44 % agreed, 9 % disagreed.

The ESF played a significant role in maintaining levels of public expenditure in labour market, education and training (see section 5.7), and social policies in times of budgetary consolidation (see section 5.1), thus facilitating contra-cyclical policy reaction. Though financially limited at EU level, the ESF has great significance for a sizeable number of (especially CONV) Member

States, and the availability of the funding and the flexibility of the programming helped provide financial stability and address the challenges raised by the crisis. As a result, the ESF helped mitigate and address the negative effects of the crisis

Member States used the built-in ESF flexibility to reallocate and maintain expenditure to the groups most vulnerable during the crisis (men, young people, the low-skilled). Additional resources were dedicated to short-term work arrangements (e.g. in Italy and the Czech Republic) and instituting general placement services (Finland).

Finally, some Member States receiving assistance under the various multilateral financial support mechanisms made significant use of the ESF to finance the delivery and reforms of ALMPs (CY, PT, LV, ES, EL), youth employment (EL, PT, CY, ES), the modernisation of VET systems, education systems and the strengthening of apprenticeship systems (LV, PT), and welfare system, judiciary and administrative reforms (LV, EL). The monitoring of the Greek memorandum of understanding made a priority of ensuring the availability of funding for national contributions and human resources for the adequate absorption and implementation of the programmes, with Commission support via technical assistance and increased co-financing.

In the open public consultation, two thirds of the respondents agreed with the statement that the ESF OPs helped to mitigate the effects of the economic and financial crisis (see section 5.1).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

6.1. Conclusions

During 2007-2013 ESF aimed at improving employment and job opportunities, enhancing human capital and the adaptability of workers and reinforcing the social inclusion of disadvantaged people in the EU. These aims proved to be fully *relevant* in the economic context in which the programmes were designed and even more so during their implementation, due to the deterioration of the socio-economic started in 2008. The alignment with EU policies and priorities under the Lisbon Strategy and Europe 2020 (employment guidelines and country specific recommendations) was much stronger in 2007-2013 than in 2000-2006 and meant that resources were concentrated on relevant policy priorities. The ESF also played a significant role in mitigating the negative effects of the crisis (notably in CONV regions) and responding effectively to associated emerging challenges.

The evaluation, despite the limitations of the data sets available, presents evidence that ESF in 2007-2013 reached a significant number of EU citizens and that the interventions were generally *effective* in reaching the target groups more in need of support (such as the low-skilled and unemployed), integrating people into the labour market, gaining jobs, improving their skills and social inclusion. ESF was instrumental in providing support to groups that otherwise would not have been supported, or not to the same extent, by other interventions at EU or national level, such as migrants, the disabled and members of marginalised communities (e.g. Roma).

On the *efficiency* of ESF, the evaluation provides estimates of the average cost per participant in all interventions, but due to the influence of local conditions, the type of interventions and how ESF is used in Member States, it proved difficult to conclude substantially on the efficiency of

the programme. The evaluation however highlighted the need to simplify further procedures and to continue reducing the administrative burden in management and control systems.

Despite the increased emphasis on *mainstreaming gender* considerations in this programming period, there is insufficient evidence to assess the inclusion of gender equality in intervention design, objectives and target groups.

There was considerable variation in observed *sustainability* of results for individuals, mixed results were found for the sustainability of results for interventions targeting systems as there was no common approach for assessing it..

While *coherence* had been checked *ex ante* in the negotiations of Operational Programmes, the evaluation found few examples of actual synergies and inter-programme coordination between ESF and other EU and structural funds during implementation.

The evaluation concluded that ESF programmes generated EU added value in various ways. The most significant were *volume* effects (providing significant financial resources to address employment and social challenges in a majority of Member States), *scope* effects (ESF action broadens existing action by supporting groups or policy areas that would not otherwise receive support) and *role* effects (support for local/regional innovations that are then mainstreamed at national level and for the introduction of new ways in which various stakeholders can work together). The ESF provided significant support for the *modernisation, strengthening and widening of the scope of public services* such as public employment services (PESs) and other institutions responsible for active labour market actions.

ESF had *socio-economic impacts*, to varying degrees, at three levels: micro (large number of people participating in ESF activities, gaining employment, qualifications, skills and competences including ‘softer’, such as behavioural changes), meso (effects modernising, strengthening and widening the scope of public services active in ALMP but also education, judiciary and general administration) and macro (effects on GDP and productivity, employment, unemployment and participation, early school leaving rates). While at macro level it is difficult to prove causality, the evidence allows to conclude that the ESF did contribute to *strengthen economic and social cohesion*.

6.2. Lessons learned from the 2007-2013 *ex post* evaluation

A number of lessons were learned in various areas. The open public consultation and DG REGIO’s evaluation of delivery systems also offered interesting insights. These lessons are consistent with those from previous evaluations, such as those from the Expert Evaluation Network.

Table 9: Overview of lessons learned

Area	Lessons learned
Policy choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – continue aligning ESF with EU/national priorities – keep flexibility to adjust to emerging needs
Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – robust definition of objectives, targets and results

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – support programming with better evidence
Target groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ensure coverage of disadvantaged groups – reinforce focus on young and older people and ensure gender balance
Programme implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – promote customisation to the needs of specific target groups – improve capacity-building at all levels⁶⁷ – further simplify procedures and continue reduction of administrative burden
Monitoring system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – greater standardisation of programme indicators – improve use of longitudinal and micro-data – capture effects other than employment and qualifications
Evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – more robust impact evaluations – reintroduce final evaluations

Continue aligning ESF with EU/national priorities

ESF 2007-2013 was an important instrument supporting national and EU priorities under the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategies, and contributed to the social open method of coordination and the 2020 education and training strategy. This evaluation concluded that the ESF should continue to align with EU and national policies and priorities, especially with the CSRs under the European Semester. It should also continue to contribute to economic, social and territorial cohesion by increasing the concentration of resources and maintaining different co-financing rates for Member States⁶⁸.

Keep flexibility to adjust to emerging needs

In 2007-2013, ESF investments were implemented with a degree of flexibility in defining priorities and OP architecture; this allowed MAs to adapt the specific design of calls for proposals and facilitated a more effective and timely response to external shocks and implementation challenges. The ESF also allowed for programmes to be amended in line with new policy orientations due to changes in the external environment and evolving needs. It is important to pursue a well-balanced stable policy with flexibility where needed.

Robust definition of objectives, targets and results

Sometimes, the OP architecture was defined too broadly and the output and result indicators were not always clearly aligned with the objectives of the PAX. The objectives for the various priorities could be defined in a more robust way and supported by clear and measurable baselines, milestones and targets to allow for a clear definition of the nature of interventions and a firmer dividing line between policy fields and types of intervention within the programmes.

⁶⁷ Capacity was indicated as main hindrance preventing absorption of funds by the thematic evaluations.

⁶⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/pdf/expost2013/wp14c_d_executive_summary_en.pdf

A number of ESF interventions did not have output and/or result targets. Often, targets were not realistic or measured what was easily measurable (i.e.: outputs) rather than the progress achieved in addressing the problem (results). A common target-setting methodology at EU level, including coherent and consistent terminology and definitions, procedures and preferable types of target, would improve the monitoring of achievements and the implementation of mechanisms to adjust targets.

Support programming with better evidence

The thematic evaluations showed that some interventions were funded without prior appraisal of their anticipated effectiveness or consideration of similar experiences in the past. The assessment of efficiency was hindered by a lack of data on individual project activity costs. There is scope for more evidence-based programming, with activities being chosen on the basis of evidence of their past (cost-) effectiveness or *ex ante* assessment of potential impacts.

Information was lacking to assess the sustainability of ESF interventions to help guide future policy-making. Factoring in sustainability from the outset means that planning for sustaining activities (including contingency planning for follow-up and/or appropriate exit strategies) should begin alongside the programming.

Ensure coverage of disadvantaged groups

The in-depth thematic evaluations pointed to the difficulty of reaching out to the most disadvantaged (such as addicts and ex-offenders) and communities such as Roma. Nevertheless, the ESF funded effective approaches to reaching out to and engaging with these groups in some Member States, combined with the provision of intensive support throughout the intervention (and subsequent follow-up). The reduced proportion of participation by disadvantaged groups (see section 5.2) in 2007-2013 signals that the ESF support worked less well than intended and that stronger support is needed for a stable integration of disadvantaged groups in the labour force.

Reinforce focus on young and older people and balanced representation by gender

The increased EU-level policy attention to youth unemployment and the introduction of various specific youth employment policies in 2010-2013 did not translate directly into increased participation by young people (under 25) in the second half of the programming period.

The proportion of participants aged 55-64 has been stable over the years, but seems comparatively small in view of the growing attention to active ageing in the context of rising pensionable ages and reduced incentives for early retirement. The HC thematic evaluation concludes that the needs of older workers were not met well, while that on A2E indicates that interventions specifically dealing with active ageing are quite limited. The Court of Auditors special report no 25/2012 (*Are tools in place to monitor the effectiveness of European Social Fund spending on older workers?*) also pointed out that this target group did not necessarily have its own indicators or targets. Consequently, it was not possible to assess the effectiveness of the actions addressing their needs.

Insufficient attention was paid to gender sensitivity during project development and this remains an area for attention in future programming.

Promote customisation to the needs of specific target groups

The thematic evaluations⁶⁹ report more positive effects for interventions that target a clearly defined target group than those with a wider scope (especially for interventions addressing disadvantaged groups and those facing multiple challenges such as addictions or health issues). Moreover, in line with the findings of the HC thematic evaluation, it is needed that interventions meet real demands or needs (especially for those who are already motivated to improve their qualifications or to search for work) and address clear gaps in the labour market.

Improve capacity-building at all levels

The main reasons for delayed implementation of the ESF, apart from the economic and financial crisis, were delayed start of interventions, a lack of management skills and the administrative capacity of delivery partners, especially at the beginning of the programming period⁷⁰. This underlines the need to continuously to improve ESF management and coordination practices by further capacity-building, training and mentoring (particularly among stakeholders new to the ESF) and avoiding pitfalls of 'capacity traps'.

Further simplify procedures and continue reduction of administrative burden

The issues concerning administrative burden appeared to be the result of implementation problems related to inertia and lack of legal certainty, rather than inherent to the design of the system. There is a need to increase the uptake of simplification measures. Application procedures and supporting documentation should be clear and easy to follow (see section 5.3). Detailed and clear methodological guidelines on financial and performance-reporting requirements are essential to facilitate sound financial management and reporting by beneficiaries. The use of technologies and e-tools for declaring costs and keeping records electronically together with increased use of standardised costs in ESF delivery may improve transparency, access and, in the case of several interventions, generated sustainable practices.

Greater standardisation of programme indicators

The obligation to provide the Commission with standardised Annex XXIII data on ESF participants was a crucial improvement for monitoring data on participations in 2007-2013 as compared with 2000-2006. However, important shortcomings remained (different interpretations of common definitions, lack of common result indicators)⁷¹, limiting the possibilities of monitoring progress on outputs and results after the interventions, evaluating their effectiveness and sustainability (long-term results/impact) and aggregating data at EU level.

Improve use of longitudinal and micro-data

Where micro-data on participants are available, they improve opportunities for evaluation: the evaluator can analyse the data and conduct surveys. It is even better to have both longitudinal and micro-data on participants, as this makes it possible to carry out counterfactual analysis,

⁶⁹ Especially: European Social Fund (ESF) 2007 – 2013 ex post evaluation: Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society'

⁷⁰ •ESF Ex-Post evaluation Synthesis 2007-2013: EU Synthesis report

⁷¹ See Annex 6

providing information on the net effectiveness of interventions⁷². However, only few Member States made use of micro-data to carry out (counterfactual) evaluations during the 2007-2013 programming period, showing the need to increase the impact evaluation effort in the forthcoming period.

Capture effects other than employment and qualifications

There is increasing evidence that active measures in the field of employment, SI and HC have other effects (e.g. on health and criminality) and benefits (e.g. increased confidence), even if the interventions do not result in a regular (not subsidised) job. However, usually such other benefits are not taken into account. Particularly for disadvantaged groups with multiple problems, an evaluation framework is required that is broader than the usual approach of looking only at the effect of active measures on job-entry chances and savings on unemployment benefits. The traditional approach probably underestimates the total benefits to society resulting from the measures. There is a need for consistent approaches to assessing trends in the achievement of such 'soft' results.

The impacts of ESF support in the fields of PP and SIC are difficult to measure (in terms of improved public services). A solution could be to focus the evaluation on measuring the empowerment (improving the knowledge, understanding and ownership to take action) of the public services, stakeholders and professionals involved.

More robust impact evaluations

This *ex post* evaluation concluded that the quality, methodology and scope of evaluations varied substantially between Member States and that these consisted mostly of process evaluations rather than impact evaluations. Only a small number of Member States carried out CIEs, partly due to the limited availability of micro-data in 2007-2013.

The Commission took the initiative of creating for the first time a database of all evaluations carried out by Member States during the programming period (1 163 evaluations) and issued a number of thematic reports based on this evidence. However, as these evaluations were mainly process-related and included very few impact evaluations and even fewer CIEs, in 2013 it started working with the Joint Research Centre to promote CIEs in Member States⁷³ through the creation of the Centre for Research on Impact Evaluation (CRIE) to undertake awareness-raising, training and guidance on the carrying-out of such evaluations through CIE 'community of practice', a biannual conference (COMPIE) bringing together CIE evaluators and ESF programme managers. It also subsidised a number of pilot projects in Member States (see section 5.8), which established that the level of CIE expertise varied across countries and that capacity-building is critical for the success of CIE. The report on the projects⁷⁴ stressed that evaluation needs should be built into the design of interventions, so as to ensure the availability of the data necessary for any subsequent evaluations.

⁷² *Synthesis report on pilot projects to carry out ESF related counterfactual impact evaluations*, Leandro Elia, Giulia Santangelo, Sylke V. Schnepf, JRC-DDG1 (2015);

⁷³ <https://crie.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

⁷⁴ *Synthesis report on pilot projects to carry out ESF related counterfactual impact evaluations*, Leandro Elia, Giulia Santangelo, Sylke V. Schnepf, JRC-DDG1 (2015); <http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=67&langId=en&newsId=2571>.

Though the evidence presented in this evaluation points to positive results linked to the action of the ESF in 2007-2013, the absence of robust impact evaluations makes difficult to establish causality as results may not be solely attributed to the ESF. The capacity to quantify the ESF effects at micro and macro levels should be further improved.

Reintroduce final evaluations

As in previous programming periods, ESF interventions continued to operate at the time of this *ex post* evaluation and, as a result, it is not possible to provide final, cumulative data for expenditure, outputs, results and impacts. Hence, the timing of *ex post* evaluations needs to be reviewed either to ensure that they take place after the full closure of the OPs or earlier to provide lessons learned to inform the subsequent programme period.

6.3. Changes in the 2014-2020 regulatory framework relevant to lessons learned and points for further attention

These lessons are consistent with previous evidence, in particular the evaluations by the Expert Evaluation Network⁷⁵ and the ESF evaluation partnership. As such they have already been taken into account, to a significant extent, in the regulatory framework for the 2014-2020 programming period.

- *The alignment of the ESF with EU policy priorities has been sought by establishing thematic objectives and investment priorities closely aligned to Europe 2020 objectives. The new programmes are designed to be consistent with the European Semester priorities, taking into account the national reform programmes, the most recent CSRs (and where relevant the economic adjustment programmes) and the use of thematic ex ante conditionalities. The Common Provisions Regulation for the 2014-2020 programming period provides for flexibility to adjust programmes in the light of changing needs and new political priorities (such as new CSRs or for instance the need to further increase the focus on how to prepare for the transition to a low carbon, resource efficient economy⁷⁶). A review of the 2014-2020 framework would need to evaluate whether sufficient alignment with the EU policy priorities has been achieved;*
- *The requirement to focus on a limited number of investment priorities, including specific objectives for which result indicators are defined in advance, should reduce the scope for overlaps;*
- *Coordination between the ESF and other structural and investment funds has been improved by the introduction of partnership agreements and the possibility of implementing the ESF through multi-fund OPs;*
- *The specific objectives are more clearly linked to output and result indicators capturing the anticipated change (intervention logic). Results targets and milestones in the OPs are to be defined in relation to baseline values which must be based on evidence from the ex ante evaluation of the OP. The Commission has provided methodological guidance on target-setting;*

⁷⁵ Final Synthesis Report: Main ESF achievements, 2007-2013 – ESF Expert Evaluation Network

⁷⁶ Contribution to climate change, ECA special report

http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR16_31/SR_CLIMATE_EN.pdf

- *The use of SCOs has been expanded by increasing legal certainty and mandatory uptake of SCOs for projects up to EUR 50 000 (Article 14 of the ESF Regulation);*
- *Reporting requirements for 2014-2020 will involve a gender breakdown of common result indicators;*
- *The Youth Employment Initiative has been integrated into the ESF programmes to address the problem of youth unemployment and ensure the visibility of the results;*
- *The requirement to invest at least 20 % of overall ESF funding in SI should ensure better coverage of disadvantaged groups and underpin the implementation of ‘social’ CSRs;*
- *The ESF Regulation provides for a set of common output and result indicators (including those establishing a common approach for monitoring/reporting on the sustainability of results through systematic measurement of longer term results for participants) and the Commission has issued detailed definitions, provided guidance and support for data collection. The Member States and the Commission will use this framework to report progress, notably on support for disadvantaged, young and older people;*
- *MAAs are required to store data on inputs, outputs and results (and set targets where relevant) also at operation level;*
- *The introduction of evaluation plans by Managing Authorities in the new programming period⁷⁷ is a further important step forward, ensuring that sufficient evaluations are performed covering all priority themes over the whole programming period;*
- *Evaluations should assess impacts and (at least once in the programming period) how ESF support has contributed to the objectives of each priority⁷⁸. The requirement to collect individual data for each ESF participant (micro-data) will facilitate the conduct of CIEs, although proportionality of new administrative requirements needs to be assessed;*
- *In their AIRs for 2019 and final implementation reports, Member States should assess progress towards achieving the objectives of the programme and its contribution to implementing the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;⁷⁹*
- *As their final evaluations would by definition arrive too late, Member States are required to present by December 2022 (two years before the completion date of the ex post evaluation of the 2014-2020 programming period) a report summarising the findings of all evaluations (Article 114(2)), which the Commission will use to support its own ex post evaluation, due by end of 2024.⁸⁰*

Other lessons require attention during the 2014-2020 implementation period and post-2020:

- *‘Soft’ results were not considered in the common monitoring framework for 2014-2020, but the Commission should encourage Member States to use them, in particular for the purpose of impact evaluations;*

⁷⁷ Article 56(1) Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013

⁷⁸ Article 56(3) Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013

⁷⁹ Article 50(5) Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013

⁸⁰ Article 57 Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013

- *The Commission supports Member States’ evaluation capacity on an ongoing basis through its regular meetings with evaluations partners and the ‘community of practice’ by CRIE as well as evaluation helpdesk. In these forums, the Commission fosters the combined use of micro-data and administrative registers to carry out longitudinal studies. It will also seek to address issues such as capturing the effects other than employment and qualifications fostering the use of macro-economic models to estimate impacts;*
- *The Commission will also explore possibilities to better capture the results of capacity building activities, for example by fostering the measurement of empowerment;*
- *The Commission will continue its efforts to persuade Member States to increase the uptake of simplification procedures and reduce administrative burden for beneficiaries, MAs and implementing bodies, such as the recently proposed Delegated Act on SCOs and the simplification of reporting on households in the framework of the ‘Omnibus Regulation’⁸¹;*
- *FEI implementation was disappointing and hampered by a slow disbursement of funds and by reporting arrangement deficiencies. Some issues were addressed in 2007-2013 (e.g. through more detailed reporting arrangements) and 2014-2020 periods, but there is a continued need for support and promotion in the use of FEIs for future programming periods;*
- *Although progressive simplification measures were introduced in 2007-2013, the overall level of uptake remained low. The mandatory use of SCOs for small projects in 2014-2020 should be seen as a step in the right direction. Further ways in which the authorities can improve legal certainty should be sought, so as to address the concerns on the part of MAs that prevent the widespread adoption of SCOs;*
- *Although the strengthened audit framework resulted in a reduction of reported error rates as compared with previous programming periods, audit remained one of the areas identified in the open public consultation and the DG REGIO evaluation on delivery systems as excessively burdensome. Means of streamlining the application of the single-audit principle should be considered in forthcoming programming periods; and*
- *The Commission will consider the recommendations of the high-level group of independent experts on monitoring simplification for beneficiaries of the European structural and investment funds.*

This evaluation will feed into discussions on post-2020 and any impact assessment for future programming periods.

7. DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

All interim and final deliverables have been published on DG EMPL’s website (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=701&langId=en&moreDocuments=yes>) and the CIRCA website (<https://circabc.europa.eu/>).

⁸¹ Mid-term review/revision of the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020

The draft reports of the thematic and synthesis evaluations were presented to the ESF Technical Working Group in 2015 and 2016. The results were also presented at the 7th European Conference on Evaluation of Cohesion Policy on 9-10 June 2016, allowing discussion with a broader range of stakeholders on the findings and lessons of the *ex post* evaluations⁸². Further dissemination activities are foreseen, notably during the discharge procedure, the March conference in Malta, and the events linked to the celebration of the 60th year of the ESF.

The evaluation will be uploaded to the EU institutions' studies database.

Annex 1: Headline figures for ESF in CONV regions: participation and results

Annex 2: Headline figures for ESF in RCE regions: participation and results

Annex 3: Procedural information

Annex 4: Synopsis of stakeholder consultations

Annex 5: Methods

Annex 6: Data limitations

⁸² 7th European Evaluation Conference 'The result orientation: Cohesion Policy at work' organised by the Directorates-General for Regional and Urban Policy and Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. Cf.: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/evaluations/conferences/evaluating-effects/

Annex 1 Headline figures for ESF in CONV regions: participation and results

ESF in Convergence Regions	HC	A2E	SI	SIC	PP	Total
Participations (in million persons)	43.3	12.9	4	1.4	0.1	61.8
Employed	15.5	2.3	1	1.3	0.1	20.3
Of which self-employed	1	0.2	0.1	0	0	1.4
Unemployed	3.8	9.1	1.4	0	0	14.4
Of which LTU	1	2.5	0.7	0	0	4.2
Inactive	23.9	1.5	1.6	0	0	27.1
Women	23.3	7.1	2.3	0.9	0.1	33.8
Youth (16-24)	14	3.2	0.9	0.1	0	18.1
Older (55-64)	1.9	1.4	0.3	0.1	0	3.8
Disadvantaged	4.9	32.9	1916.9	79 0.1	18 0	10.1
low skilled (ISCED 1-2)	18	4.8	1.4	0	0	24.2
Aggregated Results						
Participants gaining an employment including self-employed (millions)	1	2.1	0.4	0	0	3.5
Participants gaining a qualification (millions)	4.4	0.9	0.3	0.5	0	6.1
Participants gaining other positive results (millions)	8	0.6	0.6	0.1	0	9.3
Total results for participants	13.4	3.6	1.3	0.6	0	18.9
Entities supported (thousands)	135.7	12.4	0.5	2.1	0	150.7
Products (thousands)	12.6	54.5	0	1.6	0	68.7
Success Rates for participants (37 % of allocation, 41 % of all participations)	46 %	39 %	39 %			44 %
Gaining an employment	7 %	58 %	31 %			
Gaining a qualification	33 %	25 %	23 %			
Other positive results	60 %	17 %	46 %			

Annex 2 Headline figures for ESF in RCE regions: participation and results

	HC	A2E	SI	SIC	PP	Total
Participations (in million persons)	17.1	15.9	3.8	0.1	0	36.9
Employed	10.1	2.3	0.3	0.1	0	12.7
Of which self-employed	0.8	0.2	0	0	0	1
Unemployed	2.6	10.8	2.3	0	0	15.7
Of which LTU	0.6	2.9	1.2	0	0	4.7
Inactive	4.4	2.9	1.2	0	0	8.5
Women	8	7.6	1.8	0	0	17.4
Youth (16-24)	5.4	5.2	1.3	0	0	11.9
Older (55-64)	1.2	1	0.2	0	0	2.4
Disadvantaged	2.7	6.1	2.3	0	0	11.1
low skilled (ISCED 1-2)	6	6.4	2.2	0	0	14.6
Aggregated Results						
Participants gaining an employment including self-employed (millions)	0.8	4.6	0.5	0	0	5.9
Participants gaining a qualification (millions)	2.0	0.3	0.3	0	0	2.6
Participants gaining other positive results (millions)	2.2	0.8	1.3	0	0	4.4
Total results for participants	5.1	5.7	2.1	0	0	12.9
Entities supported (thousands)	117.9	7	0.4	0	0	125.3
Products (thousands)	40.4	0.1	0	0	0	40.5
Success Rates for participants (32 % of allocation, 29 % of all participations)	48 %	37 %	66 %			44 %
Gaining an employment	16 %	81 %	24 %			
Gaining a qualification	41 %	5 %	14 %			
Other positive results	43 %	14 %	62 %			

Annex 3 Procedural information

This staff working document is based on the following external studies commissioned by DG EMPL.

Title	Contractor	Time period/ Scope	Published reports (Link)
Preparatory study for the <i>ex post</i> evaluation of ESF 2007-2013	Panteia in association with LSE enterprise	2012/10-2013/10 Overall design of the evaluation based on review of OPs and data available in the monitoring and reporting system.	http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=11325&langId=en
European Social Fund (ESF) 2007 – 2013 <i>ex post</i> evaluation: Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society ⁷ .	ICF international	2013/12- 2016/03 Analysis of expenditure, outputs and results across 27 Member States, taking account of available evaluations and a detailed study of a total of 58 interventions in eight countries	Executive summary Volume I Volume II Volume III Volume IV Volume V
European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 <i>ex post</i> evaluation: investment in human capital	ICF International	2013/12- 2016/02 Analysis of expenditure, outputs and results of the ESF HC interventions across 27 Member States until the end of 2013 and a detailed in-depth analysis of ESF in nine countries.	Executive summary Volume I Volume II Volume III Volume IV Volume V
ESF 2007-2013 <i>Ex post</i> Evaluation: Access and sustainable integration into employment	Metis GmbH in association with Panteia.	2014/09- 2016/08 Analysis of expenditure, outputs, results and impacts across all 27 Member States as at the end of 2014 and an in-depth analysis of 89 ESF A2E interventions in twelve countries	Executive summary Volume I Volume II Volume III Volume IV Volume V
Analysis and Summary of the replies received in the framework of the public consultation for ESF 2007-2013 <i>ex post</i> evaluation	Metis GmbH in consortium with Panteia	Analysis and summary of the results from the public consultation for the <i>ex post</i> evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF), programming period 2007-2013.	http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15997&langId=en
ESF 2007-2013 <i>ex post</i> evaluation: Synthesis.	Metis GmbH in consortium with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini and Panteia	Synthesis of the results of the thematic evaluations. Update of the data based on AIRs for 2014 for 28 Member States including Croatia. Update of the national inventories of	As at 29/08/2016 only draft reports have been published

		evaluations. 28 National synthesis reports (including Croatia) Thematic reports on SIC and PP.	
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Each evaluation was supported by separate steering groups, that met regularly to discuss planning, various deliverables as well as to problem solve issues emerging during the evaluation process.

While steering groups of thematic evaluations consisted primarily of staff of the Directorate General (DG) for employment, Social affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the steering group of Synthesis evaluation included also number of active contributing staff of other DGs as well as the Secretariat General of the Commission. The Steering group met 4 times. In their work Commission services were supported by a qualified external expert: Professor Alan McGregor (University of Glasgow). Prof McGregor participated in the meetings of the steering groups, commented on the various reports produced as well as prepared periodic reports analysing stages of the *ex post* evaluation delivery.

As foreseen by the Better Regulation Guidelines⁸³ the regulatory scrutiny board (RBS) checked the quality of this major programme evaluation. The meeting was held on 28 September 2016. The recommendations for improvements and responses are summarised below.

RSB comment (28/9/2016)	DG EMPL response
(1) Objectives. The evaluation report should set out more specific objectives (quantified, if possible) for the period under consideration so that their achievement can be assessed in subsequent chapters. It should explain how these objectives can be measured in the context of shared management of the ESF. For instance, it should explain the practical translation of the objectives concerning convergence, regional competitiveness and employment. The report should better explain the link between the ESF and the Employment Guidelines, present the (quantified) targets of the employment guidelines and describe the expected contribution of the ESF to these targets. The report should also explain whether, for the period under consideration, there were targets in terms of regional cohesion to which the ESF is supposed to contribute.	<p>The SWD was amended to present more clearly the general and operational objectives and the overall intervention logic as well as alignment with Employment strategy.</p> <p>It should be noted that no overall quantified targets were set at regional, national nor at EU level at the level of overall objectives beforehand for this period.</p> <p>The contribution of ESF interventions alone towards (EU2020) targets is impossible to disentangle due to the multifaceted nature of the contributing factors. Even where ESF was used extensively for a given priority, it would be improper to attribute any increase in the achievements to ESF solely.</p> <p>Quantified targets were set for specific expected results within the OPs. The SWD was strengthened outline principles of shared management and that targets were set at PAx and not at EU level.</p> <p>Differences between convergence and competitiveness objectives have been highlighted in the SWD on a more systematic basis.</p>
It should clarify whether gender sensitivity and economic impact are part of the objectives, as they are considered as separate criteria.	SWD chapter 3 is amended to clarify that evaluation packages were launched before the BR guidelines were adopted. They deal separately with gender sensitivity and socio economic impacts as those are evaluation criteria

⁸³ Better Regulation Guidelines COM (2015) 215

RSB comment (28/9/2016)	DG EMPL response
	required by the Regulations.
<p>(2) Evidence base, effectiveness and efficiency. The report should further analyse whether there is evidence for showing improvement in comparison with the previous programme cycle, in terms of design, monitoring and implementation of the programme.</p> <p>It should also present data and experiences to support capacity building at national and European levels to better inform the next programme cycle.</p> <p>It should indicate to what extent the results represent a realisation of the objectives and explain them with regard to the deviation from a clear and explicit baseline that has to be developed.</p> <p>For instance: (a) is 98.7 million participants the intended result?; (b) does a balanced focus between inactive, employed and unemployed correspond to what was targeted?; (c) in how far does 31.6 million 'positive results' correspond to what was intended?</p> <p>The report should also explain to what extent improved success indicators (reference value to be provided) can be attributed to the action of the ESF, how important was the contribution from other actions/funds/programmes and to what extent were they influenced by other developments in the EU outside of the ESF (e.g. in how far is the reported employment of 9.2 million participants attributable to the ESF intervention only?).</p> <p>When analysing the different types of interventions, the report should shed light on how successful the interventions have been: it should highlight bottlenecks; indicate where the</p>	<p>The SWD has been adapted to more explicitly present a continuation of the previous programming period as the baseline by highlighting in a comprehensive manner the effects of regulatory changes introduced in 2007-2013 period compared to previous programming period</p> <p>SWD text has been be adjusted to reflect conclusions from SIC thematic evaluation more prominently.</p> <p>SWD indicates that it was possible to aggregate results into common categories for 70 % of participations, thus overall these results are underestimated.</p> <p>The SWD also analyses how well the specific results were reached compared to the target set in the programme (at PAX level). These results reflect intended specific change that was expected to be achieved by the interventions. There were no targets set at EU level.</p> <p>The 98 million reflect the entries in ESF supported projects. They are useful to check if we have reached the right target groups as defined by the various Employment guidelines. There were no targets set at EU level.</p> <p>These results reflect intended specific change that was expected to be achieved by the interventions. Reported success rates are highly contingent on the characteristic of the interventions. Ensuring continued participation of groups such as drug addicts or former offenders may be counted as success on its own.</p> <p>Macroeconomic models referred to in this SWD focus mostly on GDP and jobs, whereas the ESF is also seeking to improve other macro-economic indicators, such as early school leaving rates. Therefore the SWD also discusses the correlation with other indicators in section 5.8</p> <p>Several Member States have attempted to estimate effects on the basis of counterfactual evaluations and concluded that the ESF has been overall more successful compared to national schemes (SE, FI) or absence of any interventions (LT). However, as explained above, theses attempts were limited in size and scope.</p> <p>Cluster interventions analysing achievements in terms of success rates for specific interventions show overall progress in line with target success rates set.</p> <p>SWD clarifies that employment results may not be attributed to ESF alone and depend on the socioeconomic context.</p> <p>More systematic presentation of less successful interventions and bottlenecks is integrated in the SWD along with the most successful and success factors (tables 6 and 7)</p>

RSB comment (28/9/2016)	DG EMPL response
<p>interventions have been the most useful.</p> <p>The efficiency indicators pointing to lower costs of ESF actions compared to national actions should be assessed for their robustness and the report should draw clear conclusions on the policy implications of such indicators.</p>	<p>The comparison cannot be used to draw conclusions, this has been clarified in the SWD.</p>
<p>(3) EU added value and coherence. The report should assess, using available evidence, the size of the volume effects, scope effects, role effects and process effects mentioned in the report, and explain why intervention by the ESF was more effective in reaching the objectives than what national action alone could have achieved.</p> <p>When describing the value added, the report should clarify how the added value has been created: through programming by targeting the right target groups, or by selecting the most successful training and unemployment schemes in national policies, or by influencing the design of institutions and schemes in the Member States, or by incentivising new delivery mechanisms at national/regional level?</p> <p>Furthermore, the report should further elaborate on the reasons for little coordination between the ESF and other structural fund interventions at the level of Member States and whether the ESF activities are coherent with other employment policies. Given the significant HC component in the ESF, the report should also look at coherence with education programmes. The report would benefit from references to some relevant or significant country examples.</p>	<p>The SWD will be strengthened to reflect the importance of the different CAV dimension for the 3 main priorities and by Member States (qualitative information)</p> <p>Certain CIE (see above) indicate that ESF was more successful than national schemes or the absence of any measures.</p> <p>SWD has been expanded by bringing more concrete evidence from specific countries relating to the lessons learned on EU value added.</p> <p>SWD amended as to emphasise continued need to increase cooperation among funds and steps taken in the new programming period</p> <p>Analysis by CoA report on Education more systematically used in SWD and country examples have been included.</p>
<p>(4) Lessons learnt. The report should further develop the lessons learnt from this exercise, including how to deal with exceptional circumstances (e.g. the financial crisis). It should clearly conclude on what worked well and what worked less well.</p> <p>Furthermore, it should explain whether the evidence gathered is robust enough to justify conclusions for the regulatory framework of the coming programming period. The report should better describe the methodology used to overcome the acknowledged data gaps. How were data selected and extracted to ensure that they were</p>	<p>Many of the conclusions were already taken in account in the framework for 2014-2020 programming period, in particular regarding more stringent use of Investment Priorities, common result indicators etc. The SWD expanded to explain what mechanisms were available to assist Member States to deal with the crisis.</p> <p>The SWD expanded on those requiring further actions and also explain in more detail how they actions will be carried out and monitored (feed the Task Force on post 2020, use for IA.)</p> <p>The SWD acknowledges gaps as regards data available and (mostly process related) evaluations from Member States and uses triangulation and conclusions from other evaluations to overcome these. The methodology was expanded to better explain how data and evaluation gaps were overcome and how representativeness was ensured (see Annex 6).</p>

RSB comment (28/9/2016)	DG EMPL response
<p>representative?</p> <p>Given the lack of firm conclusions in many areas, despite more than 700 evaluations conducted, the report should outline a better approach for the future organisation of ESF evaluations. It should explain how the data collection for the evaluation of the ESF and its timing might be improved.</p> <p>With regard to administrative costs and their slow reduction despite measures taken, the report should further explore the reasons behind this problem and draw lessons for the future.</p> <p>Moreover, it should refer to the audit reports and further develop aspects relating to delivery of the funding.</p>	<p>Changes in the regulation relating to evaluations have been emphasised in SWD. The number of evaluations updated to 1 163 in accordance to the updated inventory of evaluations carried out by the synthesis study. SWD outlines importance of capacity building and the steps taken in 2014-2020 period to remedy the issues.</p> <p>Reasons were better explained and conclusions and lessons learned concerning the low uptake of SCOs due to the legal uncertainty at Member State level has been highlighted.</p> <p>Use of CoA thematic audit reports on education, Roma, Youth Action teams and older workers has been expanded.</p>
<p>(D) Procedure and presentation</p> <p>The views of different categories of stakeholders, including the divergent minority views, should be better referred to, both in the dedicated annex and in the main report. For instance, stakeholders' remarks with regard to the 'extensive administrative requirements,' the set-up of management and control systems, and reporting and audit and 'whether all funds were put to good use' should be better described. The strengths and weaknesses of the consultation process should be mentioned.</p> <p>The executive summary should keep to the page limit and should better explain the context between the different objectives and the results.</p>	<p>Information on minority views expanded in the SWD and Annex 4, overall it should be noted that there is no clear pattern of stakeholder categories expressing divergent views.</p> <p>Executive summary revised in the response to the comment of RSB</p>

Annex 4 Stakeholder consultation ‘ESF 2007-2013 *ex post* Evaluation Synthesis’

Background

Evaluation has followed standards and methods set by the Better Regulation guidelines regarding the transparency and involvement of stakeholders.

The evaluation roadmap has been prepared and after launch of the evaluation in accordance with transition rules of the Better Regulation guidelines.⁸⁴ On the published evaluation roadmap itself, one feedback comment had been received.⁸⁵ Roadmap outlined key stakeholder groups and key consulting activities. In particular stakeholders in the ESF implementation during 2007-2013 period were grouped in 4 categories;

1. stakeholders involved in the management of OPs such as Member states MAs, Implementing bodies at all levels, social and other partners represented in the monitoring committees,
2. stakeholders involved in the delivery of ESF operations such as training organisations, Public Employment services, NGOs, municipalities, chambers of commerce and other individual citizens,
3. Participants in the ESF support measures such as: participating individuals, firms, NGOs, public administrations.
4. General public: Individuals and organisations wishing to contribute to the ESF evaluation by voicing their opinions as citizens.

The consultation steps outlined below during the ESF *ex post* evaluation of 2007-2013 have followed the evaluation roadmap.

Specific target group consulted

All thematic studies relied on interviews with MAs and Implementing Bodies on the programming and implementation of ESF activities, as well with project promoters of the 234 interventions subject to in-depth analysis (in order to obtain information on project implementation, performance and possible good-practices).

In addition, the thematic evaluation dedicated to A2E included an e-survey with project promoters in 12 countries selected for in depth review, generating around 1600 responses (response rate 30 %).

⁸⁴ Published on 03 February 2016 on the Better regulation website: http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/roadmaps/docs/2016_empl_013_esf_2007_2013_ex-post_evaluation_en.pdf .

⁸⁵ This feedback related to joint farming ventures and CAP reforms and not to the ESF

Table 1 Summary of e-survey under A2E thematic evaluation

MS	Pro-jects	share	attribu-tions to projects	Active ageing & prolon-ging wor-king life	Employ-ment incen-tives	Increased female em-ployment & reduced gender segregation	Increase d migrant employ-ment	Persona-lised sup-port for individuals	Self Employ-ment and entrepre-neurship	Support to PES and other LMI	Trai-ning	Total attribu-tions	share
DE	34	2,0%	97,1%					32			1	33	0,7%
EL	5	0,3%	100,0%		1						4	5	0,1%
ES	8	0,5%	100,0%			4	1			3		8	0,2%
EE	8	0,5%	100,0%	1		3	3	1				8	0,2%
FR	140	8,2%	100,0%			35		94			11	140	2,8%
HU	39	2,3%	105,1%		36			3		1	1	41	0,8%
IT	149	8,7%	245,6%		149			43	38		136	366	7,3%
PL	1215	70,8%	355,8%		943			722	934	725	999	4323	85,7%
SE	117	6,8%	100,0%				44	73				117	2,3%
SI	1	0,1%	100,0%								1	1	0,0%
10	1716	100%	293,8%	1	1129	42	48	968	972	729	1153	5042	100%
			Shares	0,0%	22,4%	0,8%	1,0%	19,2%	19,3%	14,5%	22,9%	100,0%	

Conclusion from the e-survey have been incorporated in the main body of the thematic evaluation report, taking in account representativeness of the responses.

Stakeholders involved in the management of OPs have been consulted on the *ex post* evaluation primarily via the ESF Partnership For Evaluation, gathering Member States representatives of the ESF evaluation capacities. They were associated since the beginning of the evaluation process, being consulted on the Terms of Reference of the preparatory and thematic studies, as well as on the inception, interim and draft final reports.

Table of evaluation partnership meetings held:

Evaluation	Date	Topic presented and discussed
<i>Supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society</i>	20/3/2014	the results of the pilot exercises carried out in 4 Member States during the inception phase (AT, CZ, IT, UK)
	13/3/2015	Second Interim report
	10/06/2015	Draft Final Report
	13/11/2015	main findings and conclusions
<i>Investing in HC</i>	20/3/2014	the results of the pilot exercises carried out in 4 Member States during the inception phase (AT, CZ, IT, UK)
	13/3/2015	Second Interim report
	10/06/2015	Draft Final Report

	13/11/2015	main findings and conclusions
<i>Access and sustainable integration into employment</i>	13/03/2015	Findings and conclusions of country reports (first interim report)
	13/11/2015	Second Interim report and key findings and conclusions
<i>SIC and PP (part of Synthesis)</i>	11/05/2016	main findings of the draft final thematic evaluation studies
<i>Synthesis</i>	13/03/2015	Presentation of methodology for the synthesis
	11/05/2016	State of play and
<i>Public consultation</i>	11/05/2016	Preliminary results

All interim and final deliverables are being published on the websites of DG EMPL: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=701&langId=en&moreDocuments=yes> and the CIRCA website: <https://circabc.europa.eu> > CIRCABC > empl > ESF Evaluation discussion group > Library > commission_evaluation > 2007-2013 > evaluation

The thematic reports as well as key findings of draft Synthesis report were presented in the Evaluation Conference held in Sofia.⁸⁶ Findings were discussed in thematic workshops. Discussants outlined that thematic evaluations on A2E and SI priorities have identified findings that are consistent with the literature on active labour market policies, while for HC interventions it was concluded positive trends in increasing higher education attainments, decreasing early school leaving rates and slight increase in expenditure on education and research.

The various draft reports of thematic and synthesis evaluations were presented to the ESF Technical Working Group during 2015 and 2016. The results were also presented to the 7th European Conference on Evaluation of Cohesion Policy on 9/10 June 2016, allowing a discussion with a broader range of stakeholders on the findings and lessons of the *ex post* evaluations.

Public consultation

All stakeholder groups were covered by a 12-week internet based open public consultation was carried out from 3 February 2016 to 27 April 2016. It run in parallel to the evaluation process. In particular, input was sought from the stakeholder groups directly involved in design and implementation of ESF. The open public consultation was conducted by using EU Survey tools. In practice, it comprised a questionnaire composed by a set of questions addressing the

⁸⁶7th European Evaluation Conference ‘The result orientation: Cohesion Policy at work’ organised by the Directorates-General for Regional and Urban Policy and Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. Cf.: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/evaluations/conferences/evaluating-effects/ .

evaluation criteria set out in the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and EU added value.

The public consultation consisted of at most, 20 questions, depending on the route followed through the questionnaire and the number of follow-ups or sub-questions. Most of these were closed questions. Four questions were open questions, in which respondents could elaborate on the results achieved with the support of the ESF. The questionnaire was available in three languages: English, French and German. Respondents could answer the open questions in their own language.

EC undertook steps to promote consultation on the websites and social media managed by it:

- Your voice in Europe website
- Website of the DG EMPL
- Website of ESF fund
- Twitter (repeated messages at the launch and continued reminders by various accounts including Commissioner of DG EMPL)
- And Yammer (RegioNetwork)

Further, the consultation was advertised during the meetings of the Employment Committee (EMCO), the Social Protection Committees (SPC), the ESF evaluation partnership, and the Informal Network of ESF Information Officers (INIO). All were invited to disseminate information on the consultation. In addition, MAs were contacted by the Geographical units of the DG EMPL and encouraged to publicise this consultation on their Websites and Social Media networks.

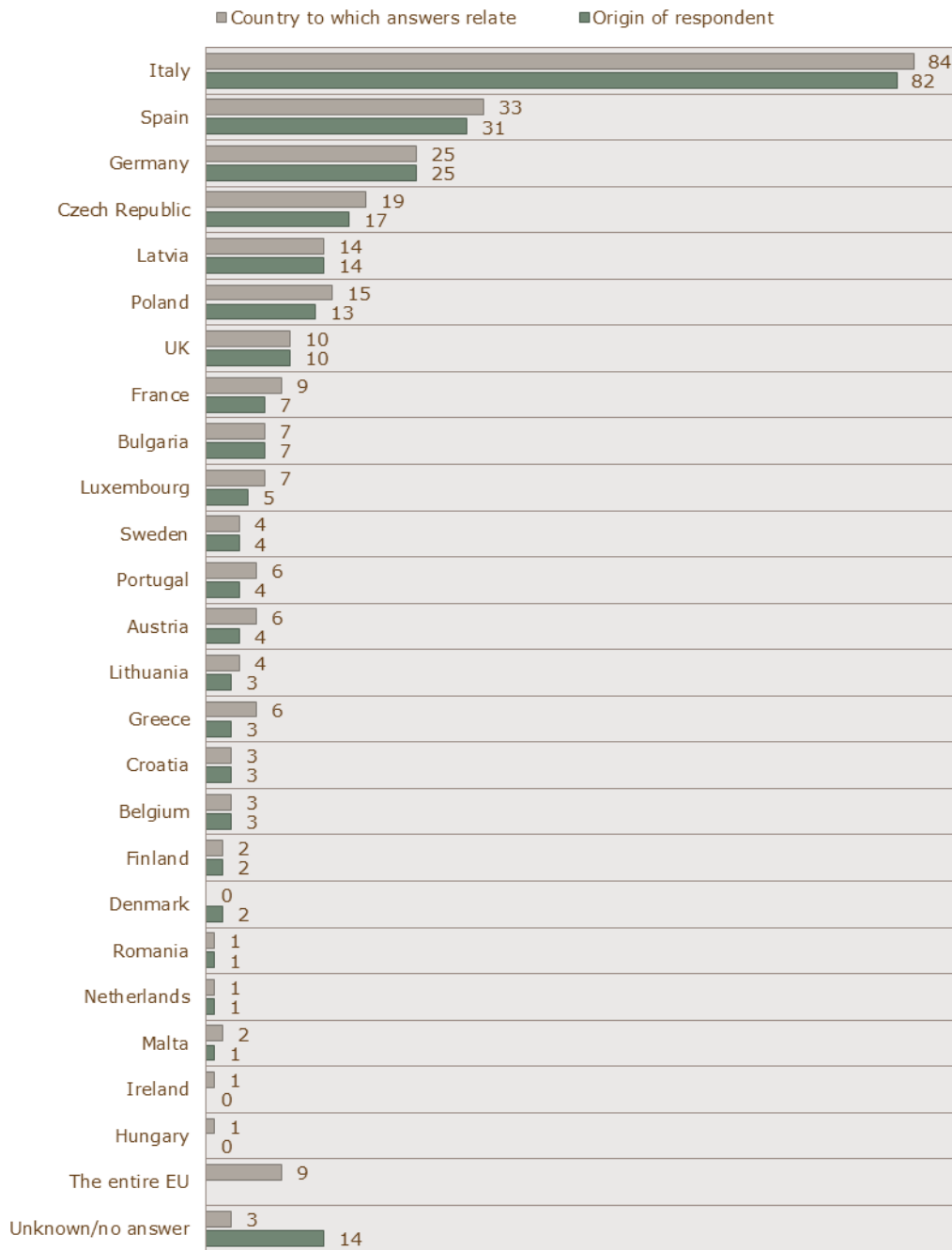
Responses

In total 285 respondents submitted a questionnaire. Out of these 285 submissions, 29 were not analysed because the respondent indicated his or her answers could not be used for analysis and publication, the respondent answered less than 75 % of the questions or respondents filled out the questionnaire twice. Responses excluded from the analysis did not differ from other responses and as such do not affect any conclusions drawn.

Therefore the response used for the analysis was 256.

The respondents answered questions for a total of 23 Member States and 3 responded for the entire EU.

Respondents: country of residence and country/countries to which answers refer



Over half of all responses relate to projects in three countries: Italy (31 %), Spain (12 %) and Germany (11 %). The respondents were not asked to indicate whether their answers refer to convergence or competitiveness regions. Based on the countries with which their answers refer, the following division can be made:

- 23 respondents answered questions for countries with (mainly) competitiveness regions (i.e. at most, one convergence or phasing-out region).
- 64 respondents answered questions for countries with (mainly) convergence regions (i.e. at most, one competitiveness or phasing-in region).

- 166 respondents answered questions for countries with both competitiveness and convergence regions. Among them are the respondents from the three countries with most responses: Italy, Spain and Germany. These responses were combined in a group labelled ‘multi-objective’.

Of the 256 respondents, 87 responded as individual citizens (34 %) and 168 on behalf of an organisation (66 %).⁸⁷ A large part of the respondents who answered as individual citizens were, in fact, part of an organisation, but chose not to answer on behalf of their organisation. Furthermore, 45 % of the respondents had received ESF-support, 36 % had delivered/coordinated/managed ESF support or was a social partner, and 10 % were in both categories (the roles of the remaining 9 % were unknown).

Respondent: individual citizens versus organisations

<i>Respondent is</i>	<i>Abs.</i>	<i>%</i>
An individual citizen	87	34 %
Acting on behalf of an organisation	168	66 %
<i>State institution (such as Ministry, Agency, Regional /Local administration)</i>	56	22 %
<i>NGO</i>	28	11 %
<i>Other public organisation (such as research institute)</i>	25	10 %
<i>Commercial Organisation/ company</i>	23	9 %
<i>Trade union, Business association or federation thereof</i>	23	9 %
<i>Other organisations (not specified)</i>	13	5 %
No answer	1	
Total	256	

⁸⁷ One respondent did not indicate whether he/she was responding as an individual citizen or on behalf of an organisation.

Respondents: Role in ESF 2007-2013 programming period (multiple answers possible)



In the public consultation, respondents were asked to respond to a set of statements which were formulated in a positive way. Therefore, agreement with the statement meant positive feedback for ESF. Most of the comments from survey were mostly positive on each question in the survey.

The questions distinguished the following five policy areas:

- Enhancing HC/expanding and improving HC investment. This includes increasing the adaptability of workers, enterprises, and entrepreneurs with a view towards improving the anticipation and positive management of economic change.
- Enhancing A2E and the sustainable inclusion in the labour market of job seekers and inactive people, preventing unemployment, in particular long-term and youth unemployment, encouraging active ageing and longer working lives, and increasing participation in the labour market.
- Reinforcing the SI of disadvantaged people with a view towards their sustainable integration in employment and combating all forms of discrimination in the labour market.
- SIC and the efficiency of public administrations and public services with a view towards reforms, better regulation and good governance, in particular, in the economic, employment, educational, social, environmental and judicial fields.
- PP: Pacts and initiatives through networking of relevant stakeholders to mobilise for reforms in the field of employment and labour market inclusiveness.

Relevance

Most aspects concerning the relevance of the ESF were favourably judged by the respondents of the public consultation. More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed with the statement that the ESF programmes were designed to address key issues in the five policy areas. This was especially the case for:

- HC: 37% strongly agreed, 41% agreed, 11% have neutral position, 3% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer.

- A2E: 35% strongly agreed, 44 % agreed, 8% have neutral position, 2% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 8% provide no answer.
- SI: 29% strongly agreed, 52 % agreed, 10% have neutral position, 2% disagreed, 2 % strongly disagreed and 5% provide no answer.

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents agreed with the statement that the ESF helped to mitigate the effects of the economic and financial crisis. A total of 67 % of the respondents agreed with this statement, whereas 14 % disagreed.

In comparison to the total results, there were only minor differences when differentiating between respondents who replied on behalf of an organisation versus those who replied as an individual citizen.

Compared to the overall results for the question whether ESF programmes were designed to address key issues in the five policy areas, there were mostly minor, insignificant differences between the respondents who had received ESF support and those who had delivered, managed or coordinated ESF support or had acted as a social partner. The only significant difference was in the area of A2E. The respondents who had received ESF support were less inclined to agree with the statement: 75 % of this group agreed, versus 87 % of the respondents involved in delivering and managing ESF support. This difference is mostly due to the fact that the group receiving ESF support answered 'neutral' more often (11 % versus 3 %) or did not answer the question at all (10 % versus 4 %).

The percentages of respondents who disagreed with the statement that the ESF programmes were designed to address key challenges in the area of A2E were comparable between the two groups: 5 % of the respondents who had received ESF support disagreed versus 6 % of those involved in delivering/coordinating/managing ESF support and social partners.

Statistically, there were no significant differences between the three groups of Member States⁸⁸. When zooming in on the two homogenous groups of competitiveness versus convergence, there was a noticeable difference in the area of SIC that was significant at the $p \leq 0.10$ threshold. Over 70 % of the respondents from competitiveness regions could not agree or disagree with the statement that the ESF programmes were designed to address key challenges in the area of SIC. 43 % answered neutral and 26 % could not provide an answer at all. Of the remaining 29 %, 21 % agreed and 8 % disagreed. The opinions of the respondents from convergence regions regarding the statement about SIC were as follows: 54 % agreed, 20 % was neutral and 11 % disagreed.

Effectiveness

Overall, the effectiveness of the ESF was favourably judged by the respondents of the public consultation. More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, with the statement that the ESF interventions contributed to strengthening economic and social cohesion in the five policy areas. Respondents were particularly positive in the following areas:

- HC: 20% strongly agreed, 52 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 4% disagreed, 2 % strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer;

⁸⁸ Convergence, competitiveness and multi-objective

- A2E: 12% strongly agreed, 56 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer;

SI: 16% strongly agreed, 53 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 4% provide no answer. Furthermore, more respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, that ESF support was successful in achieving results for individuals and organisations. The most successful results for individuals were:

- Gaining a qualification: 77 % of the respondents agreed that this was the case.
- Finding employment (including self-employment): 62 % of the respondents indicated this.
- Improving the skills and competences of teachers and educators: indicated by 55 % of the respondents.

For organisations, the ESF was particularly successful in achieving results in developing new qualifications, courses, training programmes, standards or systems by organisations. 74 % agreed that this was the case.

Economic and social cohesion

Based on the answers to the statement on the contribution of ESF to economic and social cohesion, effectiveness was most frequently reported in the policy areas of HC, A2E and SI:

- HC: 20% strongly agreed, 52 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 4% disagreed, 2 % strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer;
- A2E: 12% strongly agreed, 56 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer;
- SI: 16% strongly agreed, 53 % agreed, 18% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 4% provide no answer;
- SIC: 6% strongly agreed, 29 % agreed, 37% have neutral position, 8% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 18% provide no answer;

PP: 6% strongly agreed, 38 % agreed, 34% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 2 % strongly disagreed and 14% provide no answer. A fairly large number of respondents, answered 'neutral' to the statement that the ESF contributed to strengthening the economic and social cohesion in the areas of SIC and PP. The 'neutral' category was selected by 37 % and 34 %.

With regard to HC, A2E and SI, organisations were significantly more positive about the contribution of the ESF to the economic and social cohesion than the individual citizens. Of the organisations, 73 % (for A2E and Social Cohesion) to 75 % (for HC) agreed with the statement that the ESF contributed to strengthening economic and social cohesion, versus 58 % (for A2E) to 63 % (for HC) of individual citizens. Not only were individual citizens less positive, they disagreed more with the statement that the ESF contributed to strengthening economic and social cohesion. Of the organisations 1 %, 4 % and 6 % disagreed that ESF contributed to strengthening economic and social cohesion in the areas of HC, A2E and SI. Of the individual citizens, however, 15 %, 16 % and 14 % disagreed.

Compared to the overall results, there were only minor differences between individuals and organisations receiving support versus the respondents involved in delivering, managing and

coordinating ESF support. There was only one significant difference: those receiving support agreed to a lesser extent that the ESF contributed to strengthening economic and social cohesion in the area of A2E. 65 % of recipients agreed to this statement, versus 74 % of the other group. This means that, although the recipients agreed to a lesser extent, still an absolute majority agreed with the statement.

There were differences between the multi-objective, competitiveness and convergence Member States however, these differences were not statistically significant.

Support to individuals

The ESF aimed to support both individuals and organisations. For individuals, it aimed to promote employment, to enable individuals to gain qualifications, to improve working conditions and to enhance the skills and competences of teachers and educators. Out of these four goals, most respondents particularly recognised the objective towards enabling participants to gain a qualification. The percentages of respondents that agreed, or disagreed were as follows:

- Gaining a qualification: 29% strongly agreed, 48 % agreed, 11% have neutral position, 3% disagreed, 1 % strongly disagreed and 8% provide no answer;
- Gaining employment: 14% strongly agreed, 48 % agreed, 16% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 12% provide no answer;
- Enhancing the skills of teachers: 19% strongly agreed, 36 % agreed, 22% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 2 % strongly disagreed and 14% provide no answer;

Improving working conditions: 11% strongly agreed, 34 % agreed, 27% have neutral position, 14% disagreed, 3 % strongly disagreed and 12% provide no answer. This means that for all of the objectives, more respondents agreed, rather than disagreed that these were met, and for only one objective, less than half of the respondents agreed.

There were two significant differences of opinion between organisations and individual citizens. Most notable was that 30 % of the individuals disagreed that ESF improved working conditions, versus only 11 % of the organisations. Furthermore, individuals also disagreed significantly more than organisations that ESF support was successful in enabling individuals to gain employment: 19 % of individuals disagreed, versus 5 % of organisations. The latter group refrained more often from answering than individuals (16 % versus 5 %).

Respondents receiving ESF support agreed to a greater extent with the statement that ESF led to improved skills and competences of teachers and educators than the respondents involved in delivering/coordinating/managing ESF support and social partners: 56 % of the recipients agreed, versus 47 % of the other group. The opposite was true for gaining employment. Of the recipients of ESF support, 57 % agreed that ESF achieved this, versus 71 % of respondents delivering/coordinating/ managing ESF support and social partners.

Support to organisations

For all of the objectives of providing support to organisations, more respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, that ESF support was successful in achieving the following results:

- Developing new qualifications, courses, training programmes, standards or systems: 23% strongly agreed, 51% agreed, 13% have neutral position, 4% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 7% provide no answer.
- Rising competitiveness and adaptability of enterprises: 11% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 26% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 14% provide no answer.
- Supporting start-ups: 9% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 18% provide no answer.
- Improving public administration, effectiveness and/or efficiency: 11% strongly agreed, 32% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 13% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed and 14% provide no answer.

There were only minor differences between the perceptions of organisations and individual citizens. The only statistically significant differences concerned the support of start-ups and the rising competitiveness and adaptability of enterprises. Most notably of these was the rising competitiveness: organisations were more likely to report this effect: 53 % agreed and 5 % disagreed, whereas 45 % of individuals agreed and 20 % disagreed.

The only significant difference in opinion between recipients of ESF-support, and those involved in delivering or coordinating support or social partners, was on the matter of Improving public administration effectiveness and/or efficiency. Of the recipients of ESF support 48 % agreed that this had happened, and 17 % disagreed. Among the respondents who had delivered/managed/coordinated ESF support or had acted as a social partner, only 35 % agreed and 21 % disagreed. This is interesting as the latter group often consists of organisations involved in public administration. They perceived to a lesser extent that their effectiveness and/or efficiency had improved, whereas the recipients of ESF support reported this improvement more often with public administration.

There were a significant differences of opinion between the three types of Member States about the success of the effort to support start-ups. Significantly more respondents from multi-objective regions indicated that the support of start-ups had indeed been successful: 52 % indicated this, versus 44 % of respondents in convergence regions and 22 % of respondents in competitiveness regions. In all regions, the respondents who indicated that the support of start-ups was successful outnumbered the respondents who disagreed with this. In multi-objective regions 6 % disagreed, in competitiveness regions 13 %, and in convergence regions 12 %.

Efficiency

Most aspects of the efficiency of the ESF were judged favourably by the respondents. Firstly, more respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, with the statement that the ESF was cost-effective in all of the five policy areas.

Furthermore, the respondents judged most administrative requirements for managing the ESF projects and programmes to be appropriate, rather than too light or excessive. The five most appropriate administrative requirements were:

- communication (as stated by 70 % of the respondents),
- implementation of projects (63 %),

- the designation of authorities (61 %),
- the design of OPs (60 %),
- the selection of projects (60 %).

The three administrative requirements that are deemed ‘excessive’ most often are:

- audits (as stated by 38 % of the respondents),
- set-up of management and control systems (37 %),
- reporting (36 %).

However, the number of respondents judging these three requirements as ‘appropriate’ is comparable in size to, or greater than, the number judging them as ‘excessive’.

Cost effectiveness

Regarding the cost-effectiveness, a majority of the respondents agreed that the ESF was cost-effective in three of the five areas. In all areas more people agreed, rather than disagreed that the ESF was cost-effective. The amounts of respondents that agreed or disagreed with the statement that ESF as cost effective were as follows:

- For HC 16% strongly agreed, 43% agreed, 21% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 9% provide no answer;
- For A2E 11% strongly agreed, 40% agreed, 28% have neutral position, 9% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 8% provide no answer;
- For SI 13% strongly agreed, 46% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 5% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 6% provide no answer;
- For SIC 5% strongly agreed, 28% agreed, 33% have neutral position, 10% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed and 18% provide no answer;
- For PP, 4% strongly agreed, 35% agreed, 33% have neutral position, 8% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 18% provide no answer.

About a third of the respondents were neutral in their reply to the latter two statements and in both cases 18 % did not know what to answer. Again, this is in line with previous observations that more respondents were involved in the areas of HC, A2E and SI. Therefore, they have less knowledge about the areas SIC and PP.

The responses of organisations and individual citizens differed significantly in three of the five areas. In all cases, the respondents who replied on behalf of an organisation were significantly more positive about the cost-effectiveness of ESF than the individual citizens:

- HC: 64 % of organisations agreed (5 % disagreed), versus 51 % of individuals (21 % disagreed).⁸⁹
- A2E: 57 % of organisations agreed (13 % disagreed), versus 38 % of individuals (25 % disagreed).⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Significant at the $p \leq 0.10$ threshold.

- SI: 59 % of organisations agreed (9 % disagreed), versus 47 % of individuals (16 % disagreed).⁹¹

Although organisations were significantly more positive about the cost effectiveness in these areas, more individuals agreed to the cost effectiveness, rather than disagreed that the ESF had been cost effective.

Respondents who had received ESF support, either as an organisation or as an individual were significantly more positive about the cost effectiveness in the area of HC. Of the recipients 64 % judged the ESF to be cost effective in the area of HC (11 % disagreed), versus 56 % of those involved in delivering/managing/coordinating and social partners (9 % disagreed).

Administrative requirements

In order to participate in or manage the ESF programme, certain administrative requirements need to be met. With the exception of the set-up of management and control systems and the audits, 50 % or more of the respondents deemed these requirements ‘appropriate’. For these two aspects, 37 % and 38 % of all respondents thought the administrative requirements were excessive. The respondents are also at odds with each other about the requirement on reporting. Both the number of respondents indicating this requirement as ‘excessive’ (36 %) and the number of respondents indicating it is ‘appropriate’ (50 %) are quite large. This does mean, however, that none of the requirements were judged ‘excessive’ rather than ‘appropriate’.

Only smaller minorities of the respondents judged the administrative requirements as ‘too light’. Three of the requirements were viewed as ‘too light’ by 10 % of the respondents or more: ‘evaluation’ (14 %), ‘communication’ (12 %), and ‘selection of projects’ (12 %). There were little differences between respondents answering on behalf of organisations and individual citizens. The only significant difference was with regard to the *selection of projects*. Organisations judged these requirements to be ‘appropriate’ more often (68 % versus 45 % of individuals). The individual citizens were less satisfied with the requirements in the selection of projects. They either judged them to be ‘too light’ (21 % versus 7 % of organisations) or ‘excessive’ (23 % versus 17 % of organisations).

Both respondents receiving ESF supports and those involved in delivering, coordinating and managing ESF support and social partners are very much in agreement about the administrative requirements (and therefore with the overall results). The only requirement they significantly differ about is the *evaluation*. The respondents who had a role in delivering/managing/coordinating ESF support or were a social partner indicated that they thought the evaluation was ‘too light’ more often than those receiving ESF support: 22 % versus 12 % of respondents indicated this. In turn, slightly more recipients of ESF support thought the evaluation was ‘appropriate’ (57 % versus 52 %).

There were a couple of significant differences between the Member States with convergence, competitiveness or multi-objective regions. The requirements for communication were judged significantly more favourably by respondents from multi-objective (75 % ‘appropriate’) and competitiveness regions (78 % ‘appropriate’) than by respondents from convergence regions

⁹⁰ Significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ threshold.

⁹¹ Significant at the $p \leq 0.10$ threshold.

(56 % ‘appropriate’). Also concerning the audit, the respondents from multi-objective countries and competitiveness regions judged the requirements to be appropriate more often than respondents from convergence regions (45 % and 43 % versus 38 %).

Although the administrative requirements of the ESF were already part of the questionnaire in a closed question, six respondents wanted to elaborate further upon their opinion about these requirements. One German respondent called them ‘immense and ever-changing’, while a French respondent called them ‘too complicated’. According to two respondents from Spain and the UK, the drawbacks of the administrative requirements are decreased efficiency and effectiveness. A respondent who answered for projects in the entire EU claimed there is a tendency not to use ESF support anymore, due to the bureaucracy and delay in payments. One German respondent said that the administrative requirements during the 2007-2013 programming period were actually less than before, but also indicated that additional efforts should be made.

Coherence

More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, with the statement that the ESF programmes were complementary with other EU funds in all of the five policy areas. However, it should be noted that a relatively large number of respondents did not provide an answer to this question. This was probably due to the fact that they had insufficient experience with other EU funds.

The percentage of respondents that did not provide an answer to the statements ranged from 22 % (for HC and A2E) to 32 % (for SIC). This is most likely due to the fact that not all respondents had experience with other EU funds.

Of those who did answer, the majority of the respondents agreed with the statements that the ESF was indeed complementary to other funds:

- For the area of HC, 11% strongly agreed, 34% agreed, 21% have neutral position, 9% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 22% provide no answer;
- For A2E 8% strongly agreed, 32% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 9% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 22% provide no answer;
- For SI 9% strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 9% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 23% provide no answer;
- For SIC 7% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 30% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 32% provide no answer;
- For PP 7% strongly agreed, 26% agreed, 28% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 29% provide no answer.

Therefore, although for none of the policy areas a majority of the respondents agreed with the statement that the ESF programmes were compatible to other EU funds, the responses were predominantly positive, rather than negative. For every policy area, there was only a limited number of respondents (ranging from 10 % to 13 %) who expressed the opinion that the ESF was not compatible with other EU funds.

Individual citizens provided answers to the question whether the ESF was complementary to other EU-funds more often than organisations. However, the only significant difference

($p \leq 0.10$) was in the area of HC. In this area individual citizens both agreed and disagreed more than organisations that the ESF had been complementary to other EU funds. Of the Individual citizens, 49 % agreed, 21 % disagreed and 18 % was neutral. Of the organisations, 43 % agreed, 8 % disagreed and 13 % was neutral.

When asked whether the ESF was complementary to other EU-funds, there were few differences of opinion between respondents who had received ESF support and the group of delivering/coordinating/managing ESF and social partners. Therefore their answers are in line with the overall results. The only significant difference was the fact that the recipients of ESF support indicated more often that for the policy area of HC: 47 % of recipients agreed (11 % disagreed) versus 35 % of organisations delivering/managing/coordinating and social partners (17 % disagreed).

There were no significant differences between respondents from countries consisting of competitiveness regions, countries consisting of conversion regions and multi-objective countries.

EU added value

Target groups

Most aspects of the EU added value of the ESF were favourably judged by the respondents. In the questionnaire, three aspects of the added value were addressed: support to target groups, innovative activities and structural reforms.

More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, with the statement that the ESF has provided support to target groups whose needs would have otherwise been insufficiently addressed. The most supported groups whose needs would otherwise have been insufficiently fulfilled were:

- the unemployed (as stated by 68 % of the respondents),
- young people (66 %),
- women (58 %), and
- long term unemployed (57 %)

The respondents indicated, to a lesser extent, that the following three groups had been supported whose needs would have otherwise been insufficiently addressed:

- older workers (19 % disagreed with the statement),
- migrants (18 %), and
- minorities such as Roma (16 %).

Such responses indicate potential gaps in relation to coverage of these groups.

In general, individuals tended to indicate to a lesser extent that ESF provided support to meet the needs of the target groups that would have otherwise been insufficiently. Most noticeably: they also disagreed more with this statement. Especially their opinion about the support to older workers is noteworthy: equal amounts of individuals agreed and disagreed (28 %) that the older workers were supported in their needs that would otherwise not have been addressed.

For ten target groups, the differences in opinion between individuals and organisations were statistically significant. These were the following:

	Organisations (n=168)		Individual citizens (n=87)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Unemployed	74 %	6 %	59 %	18 %
Young people	69 %	7 %	64 %	16 %
Women	61 %	8 %	54 %	21 %
Long term unemployed	60 %	8 %	50 %	20 %
Disabled	53 %	6 %	51 %	11 %
NEETs	50 %	8 %	52 %	22 %
Inactive	50 %	8 %	42 %	17 %
Educational attainment below secondary level	46 %	10 %	44 %	16 %
Secondary or higher educational attainment	41 %	12 %	47 %	15 %
Older workers	43 %	15 %	28 %	28 %

When it comes to the question whether ESF supported certain target groups, whose needs would have otherwise been insufficiently addressed, there are a number of differences of opinion between respondents who have received ESF support and those who were involved in delivering/managing/coordinating and social partners.

	Receiving (n=140)		delivering/managing/ coordinating & social partners (n=87)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Unemployed	65 %	9 %	74 %	11 %
NEETs	54 %	15 %	50 %	9 %
Inactive	43 %	13 %	57 %	11 %
Secondary or higher educational attainment	44 %	12 %	41 %	13 %
Migrants	37 %	16 %	42 %	20 %
Older workers	38 %	21 %	40 %	20 %
Minorities	29 %	14 %	27 %	18 %

There were a number of minor differences between the answers of respondents answering on behalf of countries consisting of competitiveness regions, respondents answering on behalf of countries consisting of convergence regions and multi-objective countries

	Multi-objective (n=166)		Competitiveness (n=23)		Convergence (n=87)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
NEETs	57	11	60	4	29	17
Other disadvantaged ⁹²	58	10	75	8	52	7
Migrants	44	16	44	30	19	19

Innovation

More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, that the ESF allowed the testing and implementation of innovative activities in the five policy areas. The most support for this statement was for the policy areas:

⁹² Significant at the $p \leq 0.10$ threshold.

- HC 17% strongly agreed, 43% agreed, 19% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 13% provide no answer,
- SI 19% strongly agreed, 40% agreed, 18% have neutral position, 8% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 11% provide no answer;
- A2E (17% strongly agreed, 40% agreed, 19% have neutral position, 9% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 12% provide no answer.

There were mostly minor statistically insignificant differences between respondents replying on behalf of their organisation and individual citizens. The only significant (at $p \leq 0.10$) difference was in the area of HC: individuals disagreed significantly more than organisations that ESF allowed to test and implement innovative activities in this policy area: 19 % of individuals indicated that these innovations had not taken place, versus 6 % of organisations. On the other hand, there was also a majority of the individuals (59 %) that indicated that, in their opinion, the testing and implementation of innovative activities had taken place.

There was only one significant difference between all three groups of Member States. Concerning A2E, respondents from competitiveness regions answered significantly more often that the ESF allowed to test and implement innovative activities: 86 % of the respondents indicated this, versus 61 % of respondents from convergence regions and 52 % of countries with multiple objectives.

Furthermore, there was also a significant difference between convergence regions and competitiveness regions to be noted. Respondents from competitiveness regions agreed significantly more often than those representing convergence regions that innovation had taken place in the area of SI: 78 % of respondents from competitiveness regions agreed to this, versus 49 % in convergence regions

Structural reforms

More respondents agreed, rather than disagreed, with regard to structural reforms that the ESF was instrumental in providing support in the five policy areas and, in particular, for the policy area SI (52 % of the respondents agreed to this).

The percentages differed between the five policy areas.

- SI: 13% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 28% have neutral position, 6% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 11% provide no answer;
- HC: 11% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, 25% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed and 15% provide no answer;
- A2E: 9% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 23% have neutral position, 8% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed and 16% provide no answer;
- SIC: 7% strongly agreed, 25% agreed, 32% have neutral position, 8% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 25% provide no answer;
- PP: 6% strongly agreed, 27% agreed, 36% have neutral position, 7% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed and 22% provide no answer.

Relatively more organisations than individual citizens agreed that ESF was instrumental in supporting structural reforms. Additionally, the individuals disagreed more that ESF was instrumental in supporting structural reforms. In four of the five policy areas the differences were significant:

- For HC, 49 % of organisations agreed and 6 % disagreed, versus 49 % of individuals that agreed and 21 % that disagreed.
- For A2E, 50 % of organisations agreed and 7 % disagreed, versus 43 % of individuals that agreed and 27 % that disagreed.
- For SI, 52 % of organisations agreed and 6 % disagreed, versus 49 % of individuals that agreed and 18 % that disagreed.
- For PP, 34 % of organisations agreed and 6 % disagreed, versus 30 % of individuals that agreed and 17 % that disagreed.

Overall analysis and conclusion

The most important overall conclusion is that most aspects of the ESF were judged favourably by the respondents, or at least there were more respondents who responded favourably to the statements, rather than unfavourably. When looking at the respondents as a whole, this was the case for every single statement, with the notable exception of the statement on administrative requirements. In that case, the requirement of the audits (one out of the nine administrative requirements) was judged unfavourably by respondents, with two additional requirements judged unfavourably by a substantial number of respondents.

This conclusion is further detailed in the report, along the lines of the five evaluation criteria Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Coherence, and EU Added Value.

Comparison policy areas (highest percentages favourable per statement indicated in green, lowest percentages favourable per statement indicated in red)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6
Policy area						
HC	78 %	72 %	59 %	45 %	60 %	49 %
A2E	79 %	68 %	51 %	40 %	57 %	48 %
SI	81 %	69 %	59 %	39 %	59 %	52 %
Institutional Capacity	43 %	35 %	33 %	27 %	36 %	32 %
PP	47 %	44 %	39 %	33 %	37 %	33 %

Negative feedback

Besides the mostly positive feedback about the ESF, a limited amount of respondents (21) provided some negative remarks. The most frequent negative feedback was concerning how the funds were spent, which target groups were supported, which organisations were funded and whether all funds were put to good use. Additionally, it was claimed that the extensive administrative requirements interfered with the successful and efficient execution of projects. Furthermore, the long term benefits of the ESF were contested by four respondents, mostly because of the circumstances in their own organisation or the economic circumstances in the region/country. Finally, the term ‘innovation’ was questioned by two respondents, who claimed

that ESF support aimed at innovations could also be used for projects that were not innovative at all.

There were no specific characteristics of respondents providing such negative feedback identified.

Messages and patterns emerging from the consultation of stakeholders

When analysing all of the results and differentiating between different subgroups, a number of patterns emerge:

Policy areas

The policy areas HC, A2E and SI are judged more favourably than the areas of SIC and PP. However, it is important to note that not all respondents were involved in all five of these policy fields. Substantially fewer respondents have direct first-hand knowledge of the policy areas SIC and PP. Also, the effects of intervention aimed at the latter two policy areas take a longer time to become fully visible.

Organisations versus individuals

Respondents who filled out the questionnaire on behalf of organisations were generally more positive about the areas HC, A2E, and SI than individual citizens. On the other hand, they were less positive about the area SIC. Furthermore, individuals tended to judge the statements unfavourably more often than organisations. However, their responses were mostly positive.

Access to employment: the Role in ESF mattered

Respondents involved in delivering/managing/coordinating ESF support and social partners had more positive opinions about the area A2E than respondents who had received ESF support. This finding is substantiated by the replies to statements about the support for individuals: significantly more respondents involved in managing ESF indicated that ESF support helped in gaining employment (including self-employment) and they also judged the support to the unemployed and inactive more favourably than the recipients of ESF.

Recipients of ESF support, on the other hand, appear to judge the efforts in the area of HC more favourably. This might also explain why recipients of ESF support also responded more favourably to the statement about whether the ESF was successful in improving the skills of teachers and educators. Furthermore, the recipients acknowledged the support for NEETs (young people who are ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training’), and the people with secondary and higher educational attainment, more often than the other group.

Competitiveness, convergence and multi-objective

Due to the limited response from countries consisting of competitiveness regions, there were hardly any significant differences in responses between competitiveness regions, convergence regions and multi-objective countries. However in competitiveness regions there did seem to be a pattern in the appreciation of A2E and for efforts aimed at individuals gaining employment. In the convergence regions, the ESF projects were favourably viewed for their lasting

accomplishments for individuals, with significantly more respondents favourably judging the results for individuals and structural reforms in the area of HC.

The full report on the open public consultation is published on DG EMPL's website:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15997&langId=en>

Annex 5 Methods

a) Steps in the evaluation methodology and the five studies carried out

The design of the *ex post* evaluation presented a number of challenges relating to the extensive geographical coverage, the wide thematic scope, the combination of support targeting both individuals and systems, and the fact that the regulatory deadline set for finalising the evaluation did not allow for final implementation results to be taken into account. Additional limitations were data availability (see Annex 6) and the wide variation in the evaluations carried out by the Member States during the programming period in terms of scope, topic, timing and methods. The new rules under the *Better Regulation Guidelines* required the conduct of an open public consultation that had not been initially planned and this delayed the finalisation of the evaluation work by one year from 2015 to 2016.

Given the complexity of this task and the need for adequate preparation, DG EMPL launched a **preparatory study**⁹³ the results of which would support the Commission in designing the *ex post* evaluation. The preparatory study aimed at assessing the availability of data and at informing "which type of data" is available in "which Member State" and how it can be used for the *ex post* evaluation.

A preparatory study recommended that the evaluation should be organised around three thematic work packages selected on the basis of the information available and their strategic importance in the light of the priorities set out in Article 3 of the ESF Regulation. It also recommended that all data available at EU, Member-State and OP level be used and that in-depth analysis be carried out in a selection of Member States, so as to ensure that a significant part of the expenditure would be analysed in depth under each evaluation study. In response to the study, the Commission launched three **thematic studies**, focusing on:

- supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society (**SI**);⁹⁴
- investing in human capital, which includes adaptability of workers (**HC**);⁹⁵ and
- access and sustainable integration into employment (**A2E**).⁹⁶

The SI and HC studies started in early 2014 and the A2E study at the end of 2014. All three were based on 2013 monitoring data and existing evaluations at EU and Member-State level, and covered 27 Member States (Croatia was not included). Two further thematic reports were produced on the priorities with lower resource allocations (**SIC** and **PP**) as part of the work of the preparation of the evaluation synthesis report.

The 2000-2006 *ex post* evaluation of ESF concluded that there were many differences between Member States in the scope and use of ESF. Therefore, the preparatory study proposed a series

⁹³ Preparatory study for the *ex post* evaluation of ESF 2007-2013; Panteia in association with LSE enterprise.

⁹⁴ *European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups into the labour market and society*, ICF international (2016).

⁹⁵ *European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: investment in human capital*, ICF international (2016).

⁹⁶ *ESF 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: access and sustainable integration into employment*, Metis GmbH in association with Panteia (2016).

of clusters of similar interventions. The assumption was that interventions at a lower than the priority axis were more clearly demarcated, had similar objectives and target groups and would be a useful unit of analysis for the evaluation. Therefore a total of 872 actions were identified across 43 OPs. The cluster framework was further refined during the conduct of the thematic evaluation studies. The selection of in-depth interventions consisted of three sampling steps: 1) data availability and evaluability; 2) financial volume and outputs; and 3) coverage of activities and target groups. At the end of the process, a final verification was performed in order to ensure that a good spread of interventions was achieved by clusters and target groups and that a sufficient volume of expenditure and outputs were covered.

A synthesis study⁹⁷ was conducted to:

- integrate the main findings of the thematic evaluations;
- update data on the basis of the 2014 annual implementation report (AIR);
- perform additional work on Croatia
- produce thematic reports on SIC and PP
- produce country reports.

An inter-service steering group was established for each of the thematic evaluations and for the synthesis study. Throughout the evaluation process, the Commission received technical advice from external expert in evaluation methods and in HC: Professor Alan McGregor (University of Glasgow), who helped assess deliverables and participated in steering group meetings.

To ensure the robustness of the data used for the evaluation, each thematic report and also synthesis report was subject to comments from the Member States representatives in the ESF Partnership for Evaluation with the support of the geographical units within DG EMPL. The comments received mostly addressed technical issues, such as data gaps in the aggregation of result indicators (DE, EL, NL), identification of sources supporting findings (EE, LV) as well as issues such as correct spelling of projects (NL). All comments received in due time on all deliverables were processed and integrated to the ESF *ex post* evaluation reports.

All interim and final deliverables have been published on DG EMPL's website (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=699&langId=en>) and the CIRCA website (<https://circabc.europa.eu/>).

b) Stakeholder consultation

The stakeholder consultation is summarized in the Annex 4

c) Other relevant studies/reports used

The *ex post* evaluation has also drawn on some of the *ex post* evaluations led by DG REGIO, such as on delivery system,⁹⁸ and macroeconomic modelling^{99 100}

⁹⁷ *ESF 2007-2013 ex post evaluation: synthesis*, Metis GmbH in consortium with Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini and Panteia.

The *Summary of data on the progress made in financing and implementing financial engineering instruments (FEI)*¹⁰¹ was used for information relating to the implementation of FEIs (section 5.3). The results of the *Survey of MAs on simplified cost options in the European Social Fund*¹⁰² were also used in section 5.3.

The following Court of Auditors reports were also used, as they complement the evaluation findings:

- *EU education objectives: programmes aligned but shortcomings in performance measurement* (special report no 16/2016);¹⁰³
- *EU policy initiatives and financial support for Roma integration: significant progress made over the last decade, but additional efforts needed on the ground* (special report no 14/2016);¹⁰⁴ and
- *Are tools in place to monitor the effectiveness of European Social Fund spending on older workers?* (special report no 25/2012).¹⁰⁵
- *Commission's support of youth action teams: redirection of ESF funding achieved, but insufficient focus on results* (special report no 25/2012).¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/pdf/expost2013/wp12_final_report.pdf

⁹⁹ *The impact of cohesion policy 2007-2013: model simulations with Quest III*;
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/pdf/expost2013/wp14a_final_report_en.pdf

¹⁰⁰ *The impact of cohesion policy 2007-2013: model simulations with RHOMOLO*;
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/pdf/expost2013/wp14b_final_report_en.pdf

¹⁰¹ 2014 Catalogue number: KN-02-15-749-EN-N.

¹⁰² <http://www.cc.cec/Ares/ext/documentInfoDetails.do?documentId=080166e5a40d1421>

¹⁰³ <http://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=36886>

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=36850>

¹⁰⁵ http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR12_25/SR12_25_EN.PDF

¹⁰⁶ http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR15_17/SR_YAT_EN.pdf

Annex 6 Data Limitations

The thematic studies used data from the Member States submitted through SFC 2007,¹⁰⁷ notably the 2013 AIR and national evaluations. The aggregated data presented in the synthesis report rely on the 2014 AIR. For the in-depth analysis of interventions, the evaluation relied on data sources provided by the MAs. Eurostat data were used where relevant. Despite efforts to mobilise all available information, the *ex post* evaluation is subject to a series of limitations:

- (1) **design of programmes:** Member States were able to formulate the PAX of the OPs in a way that did not necessarily correspond precisely to the priorities defined in the ESF Regulation (i.e. they could combine two of the latter in one PAX) while still complying with their remit. To overcome this, external evaluators allocated each PAX to a single policy theme for the purpose of the evaluation, even if some tackled several themes, as PAX was the only level at which data on financial expenditure, outputs and results could be correlated (this limitation is overcome in the new period by more robust definition of Investment priorities);
- (2) **challenges in aggregating data on participation:** for the first time, the evaluation could draw on common indicators on the participation of individuals per PAX that were suitable in principle for aggregation at EU level (see Annex XXIII of the General Regulation). However, aggregation raised several issues. Member States applied their own definitions for indicators where no EU-wide reference was available (e.g. migrants, minorities). In some cases, participation data included indirect participants (e.g. pupils benefiting indirectly from interventions supporting systems) and the same participants were counted several times within the same intervention, leading to over-reporting. Disadvantaged groups, older participants and participation by education level were under-reported, notably due to legal restrictions and reluctance to provide, collect and report such 'sensitive' data. These issues were confirmed by the Court of Auditors in special reports no 14/2016 and no 25/2012 (see above). This limitation is remedied in the 2013-2020 programming period by more a robust definition of common output indicators.;
- (3) **challenges in aggregating data on results:** the regulations laid down no common result indicators for the 2007-2013 programming period. To obtain overall results, the contractors aggregated similar programme-specific indicators into a limited number of result indicators. As regards support for *individuals*, the results could be aggregated into three categories of 'positive result':
 - gaining or maintaining employment;
 - obtaining a qualification; and
 - other positive results (such as improving skills and competences).

The results presented in this report represent a lower threshold of the total volume of results achieved by ESF, since they are based on the fraction of results for which such indicators could be aggregated; this covers 73 % of the ESF budget. Further results on participation will be reported after 2014. 'Soft' results for participants (including

¹⁰⁷ The 2007-2013 system for fund management in the European Community (the official IT exchange platform between the Commission and Member States).

personal, attitudinal and behaviour results) were rarely quantified or assessed, leading to under-estimation of the results obtained for SI activities. Results were rarely reported by gender or age group, hampering the assessment of effectiveness by target group. While double counting of results is theoretically possible for the different categories of common results (eg. One person gaining qualification and employment), in practice during in depth analysis of interventions, this was not confirmed. Most often, if any at all, only single result category was set and measured. Given that aggregation of results was incomplete, presented results are underreporting actual ESF achievements. Also, the absence of a legal requirement to collect micro-data for individuals made it difficult to calculate actual success rates for them. For all these reasons, success rates presented in this report are to be treated with caution. As regards support for entities, the aggregated number of entities supported and the number of deliverables (actions/tools developed, studies and evaluations carried out, networks created, etc.) were calculated, but their wide diversity hampered a robust assessment. This limitation is remedied in the 2013-2020 programming period by more robust definition of *common result* indicators;

- (4) **some indicators did not have predefined targets:** a significant proportion (37 %) of programme indicators had no predefined targets; for some (6 %), no values were reported at all. Furthermore, the contractors did not have enough information to assess whether targets had been initially set or adjusted over time in a comparable way and noted some cases where targets were not adjusted despite a reallocation of budgets;
- (5) **lack of essential data at intervention level:** data for the interventions (or operations) analysed in depth were scarce, especially on follow-up, but qualitative findings were available. This limitation is remedied in the 2013-2020 programming period by more robust definition of data collection and storage requirements; and
- (6) **lack of robust impact evaluations from Member States:** although the Commission created for the first time a database of all 1 163 evaluations carried out by Member States during the programming period, these were mainly process-related and included very few impact evaluations and even fewer counterfactual impact evaluations (CIEs). The feasibility of CIEs and of cost-benefit and/or cost-effectiveness analyses was severely constrained by the lack of suitable data, notably micro-data on individuals, despite the Commission's efforts during this period to promote the use of CIEs.

A number of **measures** were **taken in this evaluation to overcome these limitations**,¹⁰⁸ which were also pointed out by the Court of Auditors in its special report on education¹⁰⁹:

- **triangulation** from various sources of evidence was systematically used to strengthen conclusions. This included evidence collected during the in-depth analysis, the country analysis, surveys, audit reports, national evaluations, other Commission evaluations, and the results of the open public consultation;
- Use of more of **more qualitative assessment methods** such as in depth analysis of selected interventions;

¹⁰⁸ 'Weaknesses in monitoring also have an impact on the capacity of the Commission and Member States to carry out evaluations', observation 33.

¹⁰⁹ *EU education objectives: programmes aligned but shortcomings in performance measurement* (special report no 16/2016)

- **the allocation to single policy themes and aggregations of data** were checked with Member-State authorities, which provided extensive comments. In a limited number of cases (FR and DE), additional evidence from other, national sources was used to address reporting gaps; and
- **verification of data by Member-State authorities**, who were asked to verify all quantitative information collected for in-depth interventions so as to improve the robustness of subsequent analysis and conclusions.