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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This staff working document presents the main findings and lessons learned from three thematic evaluation studies on the European Social Fund (ESF) support: the evaluation of ESF support to (i) employment and labour mobility (Thematic Objective 8, excluding youth employment), (ii) social inclusion (Thematic Objective 9), and (iii) education and training (Thematic Objective 10) from 2014 up to the end of 2018¹.

Background and context

The ESF invests in people by financing a wide range of actions directly supporting individuals (e.g. guidance, counselling, professional training and re-training, education, scholarships), as well as actions aiming to improve services to people (e.g. by modernising labour market institutions and education and training systems). The total 2014-2020 budget for ESF operations was EUR 121 billion, with the EU contribution representing EUR 84 billion².

Key achievements

By the end of 2018, about 22 million people had participated in ESF actions³. Women made up 52% of all participations. Some 2.3 million people found a job through the ESF, and about 3.3 million people gained a qualification.

Main findings

Effectiveness: There are large differences in performance across Member States, operational programmes and investment priorities. Capacity to run operations remains a constraint in some countries, especially in less-developed regions. ESF operations have made a clear positive contribution to the achievement of EU 2020 targets related to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education, both from a micro- and a macro perspective. Furthermore, there is significant potential for long-term impact through ESF support for the development of system-level changes and sustainable innovative measures. The most significant factor hampering effectiveness is insufficient administrative capacity.

Efficiency: Only preliminary analyses of efficiency are possible at this stage. The cost-benefit analyses attempted for social inclusion and education and training support suggest positive returns, particularly under active inclusion, early school leaving and tertiary education operations. Overall, actual and perceived administrative burden, including ‘gold plating’, have resulted in delays and affected cost effectiveness. Qualitative analysis has shown that factors that can foster efficiency include the use of wider partnerships and simplified cost options.

Relevance: ESF support was highly relevant to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education policy needs. Operational programmes proved to be flexible enough to adapt to socio-economic and policy changes. However, there are still challenges with reaching and addressing the

¹ The supporting studies can be found at:

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

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

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

² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/is-my-region-covered/

³ This figure does not exclude double counting as people may participate in more than one action.

needs of some groups, particularly the most disadvantaged ones, which sometimes leads to 'creaming', i.e. targeting less vulnerable people with less complex needs in order to achieve better results.

Coherence: ESF operations are aligned with EU, national and regional policies and initiatives and have supported their implementation on the ground. The fulfilment of ESF preconditions led to structural reforms, enhancing coherence. ESF employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education and training operations are internally coherent. Coherence with other EU funding instruments in related fields is more mixed even if there is often good coherence in the legal texts and some evidence of synergies in implementation, a variety of challenges were identified.

Added value: Overall, ESF support has had clear added value. ESF operations have made a significant difference in the lives of many people across the EU. There is also evidence of sustainable long-term effects on institutions, processes and policies. In addition, ESF operations also support the transfer of ideas and the introduction of innovation and structural reforms. Crucially, the ESF has helped to build effective delivery capacity in Member States in terms of programme, cost management and monitoring systems, as well as awareness and knowledge of target groups.

Lessons learned

A number of lessons can be drawn for the implementation of the European Social Fund Plus 2021-2027⁴:

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

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=62&langId=en>