



# What citizens want from the European Social Fund

## Eurobarometer survey

The majority of Europeans believe the EU can actively help their countries to recover from the impact of the economic downturn. According to a recent opinion survey, more and more people are also aware of the European Social Fund and have their own views on where Europe should be directing its efforts.

### Introduction

Over the next 10 years, the Europe 2020 strategy will work to unlock economic recovery, growth and job creation throughout the 27 EU Member States.

The European Social Fund (see box on page 2) will be key to making the strategy a success. It is the EU's main instrument for helping individuals to become more employable and adaptable, for boosting education and skills, and for combating discrimination and social exclusion.

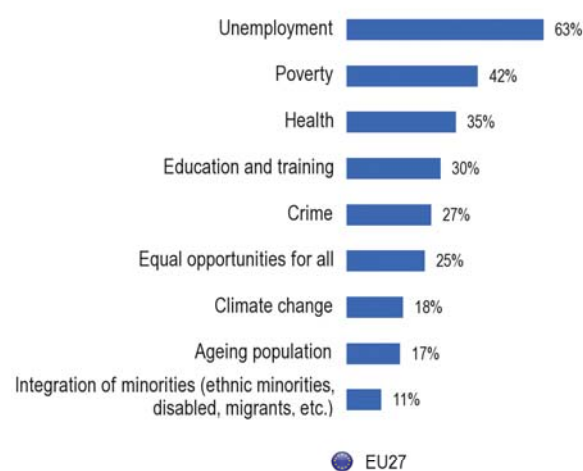
In June 2010, the European Commission launched a Eurobarometer survey to gauge European citizens' awareness and opinion of the role of the ESF. This factsheet presents a summary of the findings.

### Main conclusions

- The survey finds that Europeans see unemployment as the top priority for EU action (63%), out of a list of social and employment issues, followed by poverty in second place (see Figure 1).

- Job creation is the first choice for EU investment (56%).
- A majority (59%) agrees that the ESF should support people throughout the EU, not just the poorer regions.

Figure 1: European priorities for EU action



Source: Special Eurobarometer 350/Wave 73.5 – page 6  
[http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/esf/docs/ebs\\_350\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/docs/ebs_350_en.pdf)



### What does the ESF do?

The European Social Fund is the EU's main tool for investing in people. It supports initiatives that make a long-term difference to their life chances. For example, it co-funds projects:

- helping unemployed or disadvantaged people to train or upgrade their skills and get into work;
- combating discrimination and enabling vulnerable groups to join the labour market and be active in society;
- improving skills and knowledge through better education and training systems;
- encouraging workers and businesses to adapt to changes in the economy, and fostering partnerships that generate better workplaces and better jobs.

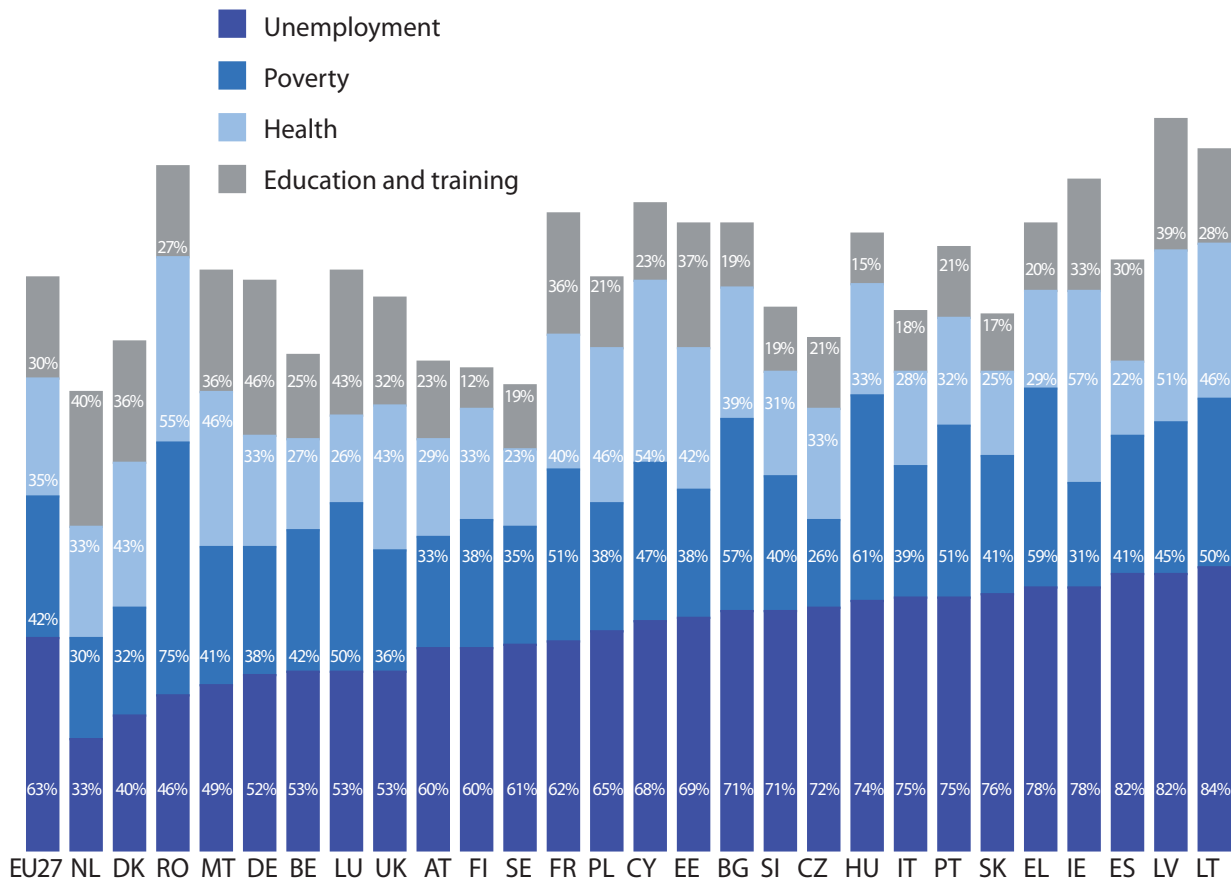
Between 2007 and 2013, the ESF is investing over €10 billion per year across all Member States. This represents more than 10% of the EU's total budget.

### 1. The main issue: unemployment

Unemployment is a major concern for Europeans at the best of times, so it is no surprise that it should top their agenda during a period of economic downturn. In Lithuania, Latvia and Spain, more than 80% of respondents selected unemployment as their highest priority. This is easily understood when you consider that 20% of the populations in Spain and Latvia are jobless – the highest rate in the EU – closely followed by 17% in Lithuania.

Closer analysis of the profile of this group shows that less qualified or jobless people, and those who are financially insecure or identify themselves as lower down the social ladder, are more likely to be concerned about unemployment. It is also a higher priority for people up to the age of 40, with decreasing significance among older age groups.

Figure 2: European priorities for EU action by Member State



Source: Special Eurobarometer 350/Wave 73.5 – page 16  
[http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/esf/docs/ebs\\_350\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/docs/ebs_350_en.pdf)



## 2. Combating poverty: a high priority

Poverty comes second on the list of topics to be addressed by the EU (42%), but opinions vary more between one Member State and another (see Figure 2). Citizens are more focused on this issue where the risk of poverty is higher (see leaflet on ESF and social exclusion): whereas three-quarters of Romanians want the EU to tackle poverty as a priority, only one-quarter of Czechs see it that way. Women are slightly more concerned than men, and older people aged 55 and over want action to tackle poverty more than any other age group.

### Engaged in the fight against poverty

2010 was the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, and the ESF is a major contributor in promoting employment while at the same time reducing the risk of poverty. By empowering people to help themselves, it enables them to improve their quality of life and avoid poverty and marginalisation. The ESF supports Member States in bringing disadvantaged people out of social exclusion and integrating them into the labour market.

Active labour market policies and the provision of key services such as childcare are still the main instruments, while education also plays a decisive role in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The ESF enables unemployed or inactive people to get into work, and disadvantaged youngsters to gain basic skills or a useful qualification.

## 3. Education and training: a key area of ESF activity

Education and training make people more employable and enable them to escape poverty, by boosting their skills and qualifications. A large proportion of ESF funding goes to this end. In Germany, 46% of respondents want the EU to target this issue as a priority, compared with only 12% in Finland. This can be explained by variations in the education systems and overall

satisfaction with these different systems. On this topic, it is managers, students, and more highly qualified people who are most likely to demand action. In contrast to the responses on poverty, higher proportions of men and of 15-24-year-olds highlight education and training as their priority. Only 20% of people who had left school by 15, or who have financial problems, believe education and training is the most important priority.

## 4. Health: a concern for Europeans

Europeans see health as the third most important social issue for EU action (35%), in particular in Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia and Romania. The ESF finances many projects closely linked to health issues such as mental care, improving working conditions for disabled people or helping drug-abusers out of dependency.

## 5. Other concerns

Fostering equal opportunities is an EU priority in the opinion of one-quarter of Europeans. But above this comes the problem of crime (27%). Europeans think the Union should also be acting on climate change (18%), and an ageing population (17%), while only 11% believe the EU should be giving precedence to integrating minorities. While the level of concern regarding the integration of minorities does not appear to be related to their relative importance in the national population, the integration of minorities remains high on the list of priorities in countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands which have focused ESF activities on this issue in the past.

Attitudes to climate change vary enormously. The Nordic countries, above all, see it as a top EU task, while only a tiny minority in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia focus on this topic, underlining not only economic differences, but also the varying way different nations view the EU's core responsibilities.

### The EU makes a positive impact

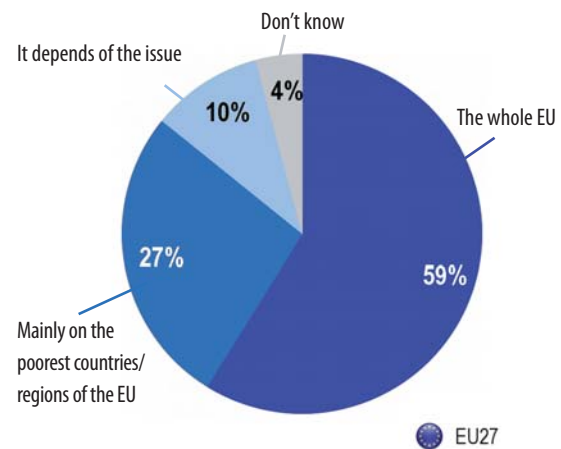
When it comes to creating jobs and mitigating the impact of the economic crisis, the majority of Europeans expect a lot from the EU. An earlier Eurobarometer survey in 2009 revealed that 72% of them believe Europe makes a positive impact in terms of creating new job opportunities and fighting unemployment. An even higher proportion – 78% – think the EU improves access to education and training, while 76% appreciate its role in promoting gender equality and 73% say it plays a positive role in combating other forms of discrimination.

More information: Special Eurobarometer 316  
[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb\\_special\\_320\\_300\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_320_300_en.htm)

## 6. ESF solidarity throughout the EU

ESF funding covers the whole of Europe. Creating jobs, combating poverty and social exclusion and building a skilled and adaptable workforce is a common aim in all Member States, and there are people who can benefit from support in every country. The survey finds that most Europeans agree with this approach: 59% believe the EU should be active on social and employment issues everywhere in Europe, compared with 27% who would prefer to target poorer regions. However, responses vary according to levels of economic well-being, with more people in richer countries advocating an across-the-board approach (78% in the Netherlands, 75% in the UK, 70% in Finland). It is people in the poorer Member States (Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria) who more often favour targeting resources to less developed regions only.

Figure 3: Where should the EU target support?



Source: Special Eurobarometer 350/Wave 73.5 – page 24  
[http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/esf/docs/ebs\\_350\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/docs/ebs_350_en.pdf)

## Conclusions

The survey reveals that the ESF is successfully targeting the issues that concern people, especially in the wake of the economic crisis: improving access to employment and job creation, helping to reduce poverty, and offering people the education and training they need to improve their lives.

It confirms that the majority of Europeans support the ESF's approach of investing in people wherever they are in Europe. And it shows that more and more EU citizens are getting to hear about the work of the ESF.

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