



ESF Ex-post Evaluation Synthesis 2007-2013

EU synthesis report – Executive summary

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Headline findings

- A total of €115.6 billion was allocated to European Social Fund (ESF) over 2007-2013 programming period, of which €76.7 billion is contributed by the EU budget (66.3%). National contributions amount to €35.1 billion, complemented by an additional €3.7 billion contributed by private funds, mobilised at the national level.
- More than 90% of the ESF 2007-2013 budget was allocated to the three main ESF priorities: Human Capital & Adaptability (46%), Access to Employment (34%), and Social Inclusion (14%).
- By the end of 2014, 79% of all allocated budgets had been spent across the various policy priorities, ranging from 42% in Croatia to 97% in Latvia. This will still increase substantially in the last year of implementation.
- ESF 2007-2013 registered a total of 98.7 million participations. Among these, a total of 51.3 million female participations were recorded, i.e. 51.4% of all participations throughout the programme period. A total of 30 million participations of unemployed were registered (30.4% of total participations).
- Young people (15-24 years old) were among the most important target groups across all ESF priorities, with a total of 30.1 million participations of young people registered in ESF 2007-2013, equalling 30.5% of all participations.
- At least 31.8 million positive results have been achieved by individuals (8.7 million obtained qualifications, 9.4 million secured employment while 13.7 million obtained other positive result).
- Relating results to participations, 44% of all participations can be linked to a positive individual result. These figures are expected to rise further towards the end of 2015.

Aim and scope of the ex-post evaluation

This report concerns the ex post evaluation of the European Social Fund (ESF) in the 2007-2013 programming period. The scope of the assistance from the ESF is set out in Art. 3 of the ESF Regulation 1081/2006 and covers:

- Increasing the Adaptability of workers, enterprises, and entrepreneurs;
- Enhancing Access to Employment;
- Reinforcing the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups;
- Enhancing Human Capital;
- Promoting Partnerships;
- Strengthening Institutional Capacity.

This synthesis report covers, as required by Article 49(3) of the above mentioned Regulation, all Operational Programmes (OPs) under each Objective and examines the extent to which resources were used, the effectiveness and efficiency of Fund programming and its socio-economic impact. It aims to draw conclusions for the policy on economic and social cohesion. It also identifies the factors contributing to the success or failure of the implementation of OPs, and describes good practices.

Methodology

Given the complex nature and the magnitude of the ex-post evaluation, DG EMPL commissioned a preparatory study to support the Commission in designing the ex-post evaluation. This preparatory study assessed the availability of data and suggested how this could be best used for the ex-post evaluation. Based on the outcomes of this study, three thematic ex-post evaluations of ESF 2007-2013 were launched by the European Commission, DG EMPL. These covered the ESF Priorities (1) Adaptability and Human Capital (grouped together under the priority Human Capital, also by this synthesis evaluation); (2) the Integration of Disadvantaged Groups (Social Inclusion); and (3) Access and Sustainable Integration into Employment (Access to Employment). It is noted that the evaluation started before the Better Regulation Guidelines came into force.

For the Synthesis, supplementary information was gathered in 2015 on the ESF Priorities Promoting Partnership and Strengthening Institutional Capacity, which were not covered by the previous separate contracts. The ex-post evaluation synthesis also includes 28 country reports. The ex-post evaluation is based on an analysis of existing information

available from the programme monitoring systems, programme evaluations from the EC and Member States (MS), and additional fieldwork carried out in each of the thematic evaluations. Moreover, the synthesis study updated the monitoring data to include data up to 31 December 2014, for research, timing and practical reasons. This also allowed the inclusion of Croatia in the evaluation. It is to be noted, however, that expenditure of the 2007-2013 programming period was eligible until 31 December 2015 and hence programme implementation continued after the cut-off date. Implementation data (expenditure, participations and indicators) will consequently be higher, in some cases significantly, at the end of the programming period than the figures presented in this evaluation.

Key Findings

ESF programming in a changing socio economic and policy context

The evidence collected on the implementation of ESF 2007-2013 underlines the importance of ESF as a relevant instrument to support national and EU economic and social policy priorities. In line with Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 on the European Social Fund, ESF priorities and programming are aligned with the European Employment Guidelines and contribute towards achieving the EU headline targets. The specific challenges identified for individual MS by the Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) towards achieving the EU headline targets are well reflected in the programming of ESF 2007-2013; all clusters of interventions identified by the various thematic ex-post evaluations can be linked to at least one of the CSR key challenges.

The flexibility in programming further facilitated by the European Economic Recovery Plan in 2008, enabled a swift response of ESF to the immediate challenges created by the crisis. In its response, ESF 2007-2013 increased its focus on fighting unemployment, while ensuring the continued relevance of ESF to deliver the EU2020 objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Due to widespread austerity measures after the economic and financial crisis, the cuts in national contributions to ESF investments reduced the overall available investments for ESF from €118 billion to €115.6 billion. To limit the negative effects for MS with financial difficulties specifically, the Community's financial contribution was raised by €641.5 million, in comparison to the first version of ESF 2007-2013.

Scale of ESF investments

A total of €115.60 billion was allocated to ESF 2007-2013 by the EU and MS, of which €76.75 billion refers to the EU contribution, which corresponds to roughly 7.9% of the total Multi-annual Financial Framework.¹ This is comparable to the share in the previous programming period 2000-2006. National contributions amounted to €35.12 billion, complemented by an additional €3.73 billion contributed by private funds, mobilised at the national level. The investments in Human Capital and Adaptability are the largest (46% of the budget), followed by investments in Access to Employment (34%). Social Inclusion interventions have been allocated 14% of the budget, leaving 2% for Strengthening Institutional Capacity, 1% for Promoting Partnerships, and 3% for Technical Assistance. There are considerable differences in priorities between MS; some chose to invest relatively little in Access to Employment interventions, while others invested less in Human Capital. Regional Competitiveness and Employment (RCE) regions invested overall more in employment related interventions, while Convergence (CON) regions concentrated more on investment in human capital.

The significance of ESF investments in relation to national funding varies substantially between MS, most particularly between older and newer MS. In AT, DK, FI, IE, LU, NL, SE, the contribution of ESF is relatively insignificant when compared to national investments in similar policy areas. However, ESF investments in BG, CZ, EE, EL, HR, LV, LT, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, and SK are very significant in their national contexts. In other MS (BE, CY, DE, ES, FR, HU, IT, UK) ESF investment has a substantial significance.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/budget/financialreport/2013/annex/1/index_en.html

Effectiveness

By December 2014, a total of €91.65 billion had been spent, which corresponds to 79.3% of the total allocated budget. The implementation of ESF 2007-2013 generally took off in 2009 and we can observe that MS have different spending patterns over the programming period. While some MS have achieved implementation rates of over 90% (AT, LV, PT), in others they remained low (particularly RO, HR, and SK). There are no substantial differences between the implementation rates of CON and RCE regions overall. As projects can still be completed and declared until the end of 2015, a significant rise in the implementation rate is expected.

ESF supported large numbers of participants and entities to address a number of strategic development challenges across MS. In total, 98.66 million participations were recorded in the interventions funded by the ESF between 2007 and 2013 (61.77 million in CON regions and 36.89 million in RCE regions). Throughout the programming period, ESF has a balanced focus between inactive (36% of participations), employed (33%) and unemployed (30%) persons. While ESF 2007-2013 has reached a considerable number of young people (30.5%), the share of older people (55-64 years old) in ESF participations has been relatively low (6%).

In priorities Human Capital, Access to Employment and Social Inclusion ESF 2007-2013 contributed to a total of 30.24 million individual positive results (obtained qualifications, secured employment, etc.) that could be linked to approximately 68.97 million participations across the ESF priorities. As such, 44% of all participations in these priorities can be linked to a positive individual result. These figures are expected to rise further towards the end of 2015.

The thematic evaluations complement these figures with additional evidence and generally confirm the positive results across the ESF priorities. While the crisis proved challenging, particularly for reaching the targets set under Access to Employment and Social inclusion, the triangulation of various data sources shows that interventions under ESF 2007-2013 have generally been effective.

Altogether, the ESF made significant investments in employment, human capital, social policies and strengthening the institutional capacities of public administrations, leading to a significant volume of outputs and results.

Efficiency

Efficiency of ESF can be mainly assessed by comparing the average cost per participation. The average cost per participation for all interventions across the EU28 is €897. The interventions in the field of Human Capital cost less (€681 per participation respectively), while interventions targeting more vulnerable groups tend to be more expensive. Access to Employment interventions cost on average €1,113 per participation and Social Inclusion actions €1,763 per participation. No cost per participation was calculated for interventions in the field of Promoting Partnership and Strengthening Institutional Capacity, as these interventions are generally targeted at institutions rather than individuals.

The available monitoring information does not allow systematic aggregation of results at the EU level. Therefore, an analysis of efficiency of ESF intervention is limited to comparing the cost per participation in different types of interventions across different MS. For a number of individual Priority Axes, costs per result could be calculated; these range between €401 and €8,340 and are in line with findings of in-depth interventions. Despite the large variation, these largely conform to the findings on the costs per participation.

Despite the considerable differences between cost per participation (or result where available) across MS, these are mainly attributed to broader macro-level conditions in MS, rather than (in)efficiencies in the implementation of interventions. Another important reason for substantial variations is the different ways in which ESF investments are used by MS. Some MS use ESF to complement national policies and, as a result, the cost per participation appears to be considerably lower. In other MS, ESF is used almost exclusively to develop innovative approaches, which tends to be more expensive per

participation. These differences do not necessarily indicate differences in efficiency, but in uses and reflect the large variety of approaches across the EU.

Sustainability

Sustainability is understood as the extent to which specific positive effects can still be observed after some time has passed, measured at the individual or system level. Across the different programmes, there is no common approach to assessing the sustainability of ESF interventions for individuals. The data that is available, however, mainly for interventions in Access to Employment, show how ESF contributed to sustainable results for individuals. However, a systematic follow-up of individual results in other ESF priorities is rare and does not provide sufficient systematic evidence to draw robust conclusions.

Mixed results were found for the sustainability of results at the system level. One-off efforts to increase the quality of education are often limited in terms of sustainability as their success is highly dependent on concrete follow-up. However, interventions focusing on lifelong learning systems, or training of staff, achieved more sustainable results.

Most ESF interventions aim for sustainability through securing continued support from ESF in the new programming period. Several years after the financial crisis, there are continued restrictions on national budgets, which limit the potential to sustain ongoing projects without EU funding. Elements that are found to contribute to sustainability of interventions across the MS are (i) the conversion of new working relations into lasting networks, (ii) sharing of lessons learned, (iii) adoption of common approaches, (iv) mainstreaming of approaches.

Gender sensitivity

A total of 51.3 million of female participations were registered in ESF 2007-2013, which corresponds to 51.4% of all participations throughout the programming period.

Most MS applied the principles of gender equality as a general horizontal principle in their ESF programming. However, this is not always positive, because such a horizontal approach sometimes displaces specific gender sensitivity actions. Most interventions across various priorities did not include specific actions directly addressing gender sensitivity.

A detailed analysis of the main ESF priorities shows that while most types of intervention have a relatively equal distribution of gender among participants (between 45%-55%), there are a number of MS and ESF priorities that show considerable differences. These differences are generally the result of a specific focus of underlying interventions and not necessarily of a lack of gender sensitivity. Most illustrative are male-dominated interventions targeting employees (due to higher employment rate of men in traditional industries), or female dominated interventions that target education or social services in Human Capital or Strengthening Institutional Capacity.

Despite the increased emphasis on gender mainstreaming in this programming period, evidence is lacking to allow an assessment of the articulation of gender equality in intervention design, objectives and target groups. Few interventions provide gender breakdowns for programme specific participation and result indicators (other than those requested by Annex XXIII), which prevents the assessment of gender specific results.

Young people

Although there are few references to 'young people' in the Regulations governing ESF 2007-2013, the ESF has an important role in the implementation of policy initiatives in the area of youth. Young people are among the most important target groups across all ESF priorities, with a **total of 30.1 million participations of young people** registered in ESF 2007-2013, **30.5%** of all participations.

Within ESF programming, a great diversity of approaches under the various ESF priorities target young people. While most measures relate to Access to Employment directly, other types of measures for young people are often linked to education and training measures (Human Capital) to improve young people's position in the labour market in

the longer term. While these interventions do not always exclusively target young people, broader interventions can cater to young people's needs as well.

Despite the emphasis on young people in many OPs, relatively few MS defined OP-specific indicators focusing on outputs and results for young people supported via ESF investment, which prevents the assessment of the actual results of such interventions for young people specifically.

The increased policy attention at EU level to youth unemployment and the introduction of various specific youth employment policies between 2010-2013 has not directly translated into an increase of participation in the second half of the ESF programming period. In fact, despite some exceptions, various MS reduced the share of participations after the start of the crisis, giving more space for ESF participation of individuals between 25-54 years old.

EU Added Value

Considerable added value was generated by ESF 2007-2013 in terms of the volume of investments provided. ESF 2007-2013 provided a significant contribution to national employment and social policies in a majority of MS, particularly in newer MS.

ESF 2007-2013 also provided added value by broadening the scope of existing national interventions. By making use of ESF interventions, MS 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, or persons with low qualifications.

ESF 2007-2013 contributed to changing the role of public services, particularly in the fields of Human Capital and Promoting Partnerships. In these fields, ESF has been used to test and implement new and innovative activities, and provides EU Added Value through the introduction of new ways of cooperation between various stakeholders.

The evaluations show that ESF interventions had added value in terms of process effects, mainly in the field of Promoting Partnerships and Strengthening Institutional Capacity. Interventions in these fields contributed to the adoption of systemic reforms and administrative capacity building in public services, such as Public Employment Services or educational institutions, mainly in CON regions.

Socio-economic impacts

The various evaluations conducted at MS and European level confirm the important role of ESF 2007-2013 in achieving the EU2020 objectives for smart and sustainable growth and social and economic cohesion within and between MS. While the current evidence base does not allow the establishment of a direct link to broader macro-level impacts of ESF specifically, the generally positive results of ESF indicate the relevance of ESF 2007-2013 in limiting the negative effects of the crisis at the macro and micro level in most MS. Moreover, a broader ex-post synthesis evaluation of Cohesion Policy found a contribution to economic development and growth.²

The ESF 2007-2013 contributed to meso-level impacts through its focus on capacity building, systems development and partnership promotion, which are particularly relevant in CON regions. The ESF created valuable impacts at the meso-level, for instance by increasing the scope of mainstream social services in various MS.

Given the ESF's primary focus on interventions for individuals, micro-level impacts created by the ESF 2007-2013 have been central throughout this evaluation. First of all, a substantial share of the targeted populations have been reached with ESF 2007-2013. Among those that have been reached, by the end of 2014, 30.24 million individual positive results (such as: qualifications obtained, secured employment, other results) have been achieved that can be linked back to 68.97 million participations. These numbers are likely to increase in the final year of implementation, and show the

² Ex post evaluation of Cohesion policy programmes 2007-2013 financed by the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund: WP1 synthesis report

contribution and relevance of ESF towards improving social and economic cohesion in the EU, both between and within MS.

Key lessons learned

The evaluation shows a wide variety of lessons learned in terms of:

- **Policy choices:** It is recommended to continue aligning ESF with EU and national policies, and concentrating budgets on areas where the largest EU added value can be obtained. The appropriate balance should be sought between new and existing activities while ensuring sufficient flexibility in programming to respond to external shocks and the implementation challenges.
- **Target groups:** The results of the evaluation point to the need to increase support for disadvantaged groups, and target ESF interventions on specific target groups. This requires an improved understanding of the needs of specific target groups while planning interventions, and requires the promotion of customisation of interventions to meet the needs of specific target groups (targeted intervention proved to be most effective). There is a continuing need to focus on young and older people, and to ensure a balance between men and women.
- **Appropriate programming:** The objectives for the different policy priorities should be defined in a more robust and clearly demarcated way, sufficiently supported by clear and measurable targets. This would be helped by a common target setting methodology between MS, applying evidence-based programming, which engages stakeholders / partners in programme planning. In addition, more attention is required for the sustainability of programming, gender sensitivity, and inter-programme coordination.
- **Programme implementation:** It is recommended that monitoring tools for measuring programme performance are improved to reduce delays in implementation, and additional use is made of technologies and e-learning in ESF delivery. Social partners should be more involved in the design and implementation of the programme in order to improve programme implementation. Programmes should detect good practices in successful programme and project implementation and share these with a wider audience.
- **Robustness of monitoring systems:** To improve the robustness of the overall programme, the Commission should aim for a higher standardisation of programme indicators across OPs and MS, and require consistent and reliable data reporting in SFC. The availability of longitudinal data on participations should also be improved to measure effects over time. Data and target setting should be set at individual intervention level. Result indicators could be improved in order to better reflect the expected change to be made by a specific intervention.
- **Robustness of evaluation systems:** It is recommended to reintroduce the concept of "final evaluation" at OP level, providing timely inputs to the ex post evaluation. Evaluations would further benefit by linking of the data on ESF participations with administrative data, and including the qualitative aspects of efficiency, in order to draw lessons for improving the efficiency of the programme in future. Evaluations could also broaden their scope beyond employment and education by focusing on improved measurement and capturing soft results from ESF interventions such as skills developed and empowerment (which play a role in the pathway to employment / education / social inclusion). There is a need to improve the robustness of the evaluations undertaken, and to further promote the use of counterfactual approaches in future programming periods. To allow cross-country and thematic analysis, evaluations could be further harmonised across OPs and MS. Finally, it is recommended to start exploring data and evaluation needs for the 2014-2020 ex post evaluation as early as possible. The Commission should continue working on the improvement of evaluation practice in the ESF in a dialogue with MS and the community of evaluation experts, facilitating peer learning and research.

Many of the recommendations are already addressed in the new programming period, such as improving the alignment between ESF and EU and national policy targets, intervention logics, the performance orientation of the programme, programme indicators and evaluation planning.

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