

Conference on
Exchanging experiences on sound programme planning
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The new ESF regulation: the means to address the challenges

SPEECH BY

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Ministers Jaunius Simonavičius and Raimundas Mockeliūnas,
State Secretary Rimantas Kairelis,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be in Vilnius today and to participate in this conference, which takes place at a crucial moment for the planning of the next generation of ESF programmes. All Member States have started to prepare their National Strategic Reference Frameworks and are defining the objectives and priorities of their future ESF Operational Programmes.

I would first of all like to thank the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, particularly State Secretary Kairelis, for co-hosting this conference. I also wish to express my thanks to the EQUAL Managing Authorities of Poland, Italy and the Belgian French community of Walloon-Brussels for contributing substantially to its content and organisation.

I am especially pleased to see so many European Social Fund partners from all Member States, and from Bulgaria and Romania.

This conference will serve as a platform for exchanging and transfer best practices amongst Member States. Its organisation is based on the principle that all participants have something to share, and something to learn.

In my intervention this morning, I would like to cover two issues :

- the importance of lending the support of the ESF and Cohesion Policy to the success of the European strategy for jobs and growth; and
- the conditions for success in strategy development and in programming for the Structural Funds with particular emphasis on the ESF.

I Importance of ensuring coherence between the ESF and the European strategy for jobs and growth

Growth is slow, structural unemployment remains high, inequalities are rising. Unless we are able to change, the forces of global competition, the impact of

new technologies and our ageing population will increase the gap between the two Europe, and between Europe and the world. Our economic success and the financial viability of our social systems – pensions, welfare, health care – are called into question.

Europe therefore needs to adapt to far-reaching challenges – ageing, which is likely to trigger a sharp fall in Europe’s potential growth due to a shrinking workforce and a declining population; and globalisation, linked to constant technological innovation, which is stepping up the pace of restructuring across all Member States.

We have a common framework: the European strategy for growth and jobs, launched last March, with an aim to stimulate growth, innovation and employment. Some experiences – the Nordic countries and Austria – teach us a decisive lesson: if we are to achieve more flexibility in our societies and economies, we have to create new securities. And the best way to achieve this result is to invest in education, training and adaptability of our workforce.

At the core of this strategy lie the “national reform programmes” due to be adopted by Member States. The Commission will soon produce its assessment of the first exercise. This will take the form of an Annual Progress Report to be adopted early in 2006, in preparation for the Spring European Council next March.

The Special Summit held in Hampton Court last month gave a very clear signal: Europe has many instruments to support reforms and modernisation, and it should lend their full support to Member States’ efforts.

Let me be very clear : a quick agreement on the new financial perspectives would definitely help to bind the process of modernisation in the Member States together.

It would allow cohesion policy to support effectively the implementation of the Strategy for jobs and growth. In the current programming period - 2000-2006 – a considerable amount of cohesion policy expenditure is already being spent in areas which are clearly related to its priorities.

But the Cohesion policy and the Strategy for growth and jobs need to be still better integrated and coherent. This is why the “Community Strategic Guidelines” – that the Commission proposed last spring - aim to strengthen the strategic dimension of cohesion policy by ensuring that European-wide priorities are better integrated into national and regional development programmes. There should not be a gap between the policy reform priorities and the effective use of EU resources.

The Community Strategic Guidelines are the basis for the National Strategic Reference Frameworks, which in turn determine the priorities set out in the Operational Programmes. In this way we have established a clear and direct correspondence between the objectives and priorities defined at European and national levels.

To summarise my first issue in one sentence: Integration and coherence is key to all programming efforts.

II Conditions for success for effective programming

II.1 Strategic approach

A first condition for success is to have a strategic approach which in the case of the ESF, shall be oriented towards the objectives of the new “integrated guidelines on jobs and growth”.

In this respect, let me just make two remarks, based on the experience under EQUAL.

- My first remark concerns the programming process. Developing effective ESF programmes that are able to address cross-cutting employment and social inclusion issues need to go beyond existing schemes and actions. The new Regulation requires a more strategic approach by first linking objectives to identified needs, and then desired results to the most suitable, feasible and acceptable options for action, based on sound ex ante evaluation.
- The second remark addresses coordination between government departments. To achieve an integrated approach and tap synergies across policy fields, Member States need to develop and practice efficient ways to ensure inter-departmental coordination. We all know that this is not an easy task.

Today's conference will provide an opportunity to reflect on your approach and methodologies towards programming, and use this conference to exchange your concerns and ideas with your colleagues from other Member States.

II.2 Stakeholder partnerships

The second condition for success is to ensure a wide partnership in support of reforms and a shared ownership of the objectives of the European strategy for growth and jobs.

To get widespread support for reforms, there is a need to involve all stakeholders at all levels, including governmental bodies, social partners and non-governmental organisations, and, of course, parliaments. EQUAL has shown how effective partnerships can contribute to the reform process.

The new ESF regulation highlights partnership as one of the fundamental elements of good governance. It encourages Member States to provide specific support for:

- the improvement and development of partnerships and pacts to mobilise for reforms in employment and social inclusion areas

- Adequate involvement of social partners and other stakeholders in the ESF interventions;
- Participation and access of NGOs to actions especially in the field of social inclusion and gender equality.

Additionally under the Convergence Objective, the ESF will support the capacity-building of social partners organisations – for they have a key role to play in the definition and delivery of reforms.

II.3 Enabling and promoting learning

A third condition for success is the capability to facilitate and enable learning and the delivery of reforms. This is an area where EQUAL results and experience can make a significant contribution.

a) "Learning from experience"

Managing change requires investment in innovation. As EQUAL has shown, testing new approaches in delivering employment and social inclusion policies and actions can become a powerful stimulus for change.

Therefore the new ESF regulation provides the framework for supporting innovation. Within the field of labour market and social inclusion, innovation is about preparing, testing, and assessing reform proposals, and transferring good practice into policy and delivery systems.

I would like to encourage you to discuss ways to support innovation under the ESF which can constitute a crucial element for a sustainable reform process.

b) "Learning from other Member States and benefiting from working together"

Europe should exploit fully its diversity. As EQUAL has demonstrated, this can also be applied to effective labour market and social inclusion policies and delivery systems. Much can be learned from other Member States and there are many opportunities for sharing resources to develop and implement new facilities or approaches, and help to translate the Lisbon agenda on the ground.

Transnational cooperation can be organised at all levels - national, regional, local - and involve a wide range of actors. It can also be implemented in a very broad scope of areas.

This conference in itself is an excellent example of the cooperation of four Member States dedicated to learning from one another.

The Commission's conviction about the importance of supporting transnational co-operation is reflected in a special provision of the proposed ESF Regulation. In implementing the ESF priorities and objectives the

Member States should support the trans-national activities. Moreover, in the case where transnational cooperation is made a priority under a programme, the co-financing rate is increased by 10%.

I am looking forward to seeing your proposals in this respect.

II.4 Ensuring effective implementation

These conditions for success will only deliver results if programmes are effectively implemented and monitored. The challenge for the ESF is really one of delivery. Words must be followed by actions on the ground: a thorough analysis of the financial resources and administrative capacity to deliver the reforms advocated in the programmes is required. Next to this, effective monitoring mechanisms with appropriate indicators are needed to enable corrective actions when necessary.

III Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have already said, today's conference serves as a platform for exchanging and transfer of good practice in planning the new ESF programmes.

I would like you to address your specific concerns in the workshops this afternoon and turn them into lively fora to debate your issues.

The launch of the European strategy for growth and jobs and the next generation of ESF programmes mark a new departure. It is now up to the Member States to make best use of the Structural Funds to pave the way for more economic growth and more and better jobs across the EU.

For its part, the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities will work for the success of this strategy and of the cohesion policy, and will assist Member States in the development and implementation of their programmes.

Thank you very much for your attention.