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Results of the kick-off meeting for contact points for Transnational Co-operation in ESF Programmes for 2007-2013, on September 12-13, 2007

Purpose of the Seminar

Following on from the seminar with Member State representatives organised on 22 March 2007, where the establishment of a network of national and regional contact points were suggested, the Commission asked the principal governmental members of the ESF-committee to assign contact points for transnational cooperation. Based on these nominations the Commission invited the contact points to a kick-off meeting on 12 and 13 September 2007 to exchange information and plans on the implementation of the transnational dimension of national and regional ESF Operational Programmes (OP), and on the tasks of, tools for, and communication between contact points.

The seminar brought together 45 representatives from 26 Member States responsible for managing transnational cooperation in a national or regional ESF programme. Participation reflected the high interest of Member States and in particular the Regions.

Main results:

(1) State of play in integration transnational cooperation into OPs

The Commission communicated the main results of a survey carried out among the contact points:

- 42 of the 117 ESF OPs will promote transnational cooperation within the framework of a dedicated priority axis. The total amount allocated under these is 1,43 billion €.
- All other 75 OPs will promote transnational cooperation under all or some of the thematic priorities or in priorities for technical assistance. A conservative estimate is that 2 % of the budgets of these operational programmes will be used for transnational cooperation.
- This would mean that, all in all, 3 billion € will be used for transnational cooperation in the ESF 2007-2013 programming period.
- The estimate is that after October 75% of the OP's will be adopted and more than 90 % by the end of the year.
- Some OPs will promote all themes of the ESF, whereas others intend to identify priority themes. Those most frequently listed (by earmarking category) are:
 - disadvantaged, discrimination, diversity
 - gender and work/life balance
 - Lifelong learning in firms, entrepreneurship and innovation
 - promoting partnerships

- improving human capital (Education and training systems etc.

However, contact points highlighted that their thematic choices still need to be further elaborated.

(2) Implementation provisions and modalities

Operational programmes 2007-2013 have been or are about to be adopted before the end of the year. This means that in the near future Member States and regions – if they have not done so already – will need to take steps to put transnational cooperation in action. Some OPs are very general on implementation provisions and modalities while others go into more detail.

Representatives from the Czech Republic and France presented the plans and provisions for implementing transnational cooperation under their national OPs, inviting their peers to exchange information about the modalities they are planning to put in place. Contact points discussed relevant issues in small groups, highlighting the following points:

- Eligibility rules need to be flexible in order not to exclude unexpected needs.
- ESF support should cover all types of activities (exchange of experience, mobility of people, collaboration).
- Calls for proposals and selections of beneficiaries should be organised in a flexible way to take account of the fact that beneficiaries need a partner/partners in another Member State.
- Where programme management functions have been delegated to intermediate bodies, specific guidance to these is needed.
- Implementation modalities tailored to the needs and opportunities of specific themes may be more effective than uniform implementation provisions across all themes covered in an OP.

Discussions showed that Member States are advanced at different levels and that there is a need for further exchange in order to clarify issues and make implementation provisions compatible with each other. It was proposed to bring together managing authorities particularly interested in a specific theme with the aim to exchange information about the expectations for cooperation and modalities of support. This would improve possibilities for matching.

(3) Roles of contact points

Representatives of Spain and Poland informed about their plans for providing professional support services to facilitate transnational exchange and cooperation with the help of contact points. The Spanish Managing Authority will establish an experienced support team, and has already identified its core tasks. After exchanging their plans and ideas in small groups, participants agreed that contact points and staff providing transnational support

- need to be experienced and trained continuously on the job, proficient in more than one EU language (English preferable), have a good knowledge in employment and social exclusion policies, and an interest to work in other cultural contexts.

- would provide services for contact persons from other countries, act as information and liaison point; organise study visits, secondments and staff exchanges for contact points, and disseminate good practices in promoting transnationality
- would support ESF management teams at all levels, in particular Intermediate Bodies (in clarifying eligibility questions related to transnational cooperation, in evaluating proposals monitoring TN activities, and identifying and disseminating results)
- will advise and support applicants and beneficiaries (by organising information events, support in partner search etc)

(4) A communication platform for contact points

Sweden presented a web based communication platform (www.transnationality.eu) that has been established in cooperation with other Member State representatives in the framework of the community of practice on transnational cooperation. The community of practice, which is funded by a Commission grant, aims at facilitating work for ESF managers dealing with transnational cooperation. Until now the work has been carried out by an operational team of representatives from 8 Member States and the Swedish representatives called upon all Member States to join the community.

The web platform can be used to exchange information between ESF managers and other stakeholders on implementation modalities, events, indicators, good practice etc.

(5) Information and partner search toolkit for applicants and beneficiaries

Whereas the above mentioned communication platform is meant for ESF managers at all levels to exchange information and good practice on making transnational exchange and cooperation work under the ESF, Member States, highlighted at the meeting in March, the need for applicants and (possible) beneficiaries to have access to a set of tools which will facilitate exchange of information on relevant agendas, experts and issues, transnational activities and events funded under the ESF, and for good practice and results of transnational projects and networks.

Access to relevant information can help transnational actions through the project life cycle:

- to develop a clear and common understanding issues, methods, and result in the planning stage,
- to find suitable expertise and transnational partners, and to facilitate bench learning in the implementation stage, and
- to facilitate the spread of the benefits of transnational work beyond those directly involved in the capitalisation phase.

Contact points expressed their willingness and readiness to contribute to the establishment of a common toolkit for sharing relevant information at the level of activities and competencies, in particular by

- participating in the planning and test of the toolkit
- promoting its use throughout all stages of the project cycle
- supporting its continuous improvement

- providing complementary support services such as a national help-desk for applicants and beneficiaries,
- contributing to orchestration and networking between the national contact points
- using it themselves for monitoring transnational activities

(6) EU wide exchange and learning platforms

The Commission informed about its plans to launch a call for proposals for establishing learning and mainstreaming platforms for EU-wide exchange, networking and capitalisation activities on relevant themes for the ESF 2007 -2013. The main features of support would be similar to the calls made under EQUAL (the platforms would deal with key ESF themes and good governance issues) but would need some adaptation to reflect the priorities and modalities of transnational cooperation under the ESF 2007-2013, and to complement the networks supported under the Region's for Economic Change Initiative.

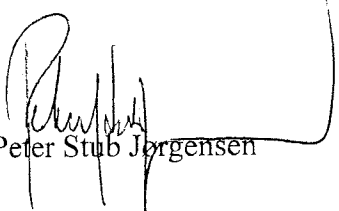
Supported activities will be: sharing knowledge, tools and practices; validating and assessing tools and achievements; developing, testing and disseminating common tools, organising mutual learning by programme managers and practitioners; and transferring good practice and the lessons learnt.

Lead partners would be ESF Managing Authorities, but partners could also be intermediate bodies. Partners linked to ERDF would be welcome.

Funding would be provided for a period of maximum 36 months; the maximum ESF contribution would be €500,000.

Conclusions:

- There is widespread agreement that the promotion of transnational exchange and cooperation under the ESF requires specific support not only in guiding applications and developing relevant social and management skills amongst beneficiaries, but also in handling requests from other member states and regions and sharing information related implementation provisions, good practices offers and demands for exchange and cooperation activities.
- There is a consensus that contact points (CP) are crucial to make transnational exchange and cooperation work
- Contact points have met personally and are now starting to exchange plans and provisions informally, taking steps towards making compatible core implementation provisions
- Contact points will use web platform to share common issues, concerns and practices.
- EU wide learning platforms would support rapid learning and integrate good practice into OPs.


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