



## **ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform ESF+ Peer Workshop with Social Partners Summary Report**

24-25 June 2021, online

The aim of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Peer Workshop with Social Partners was to explore opportunities for enhancing and reinforcing capacity building of social partners with ESF+ support. Hosted by the ESF Transnational Cooperation Platform and building upon the social partner peer review held in Brussels in June 2019,<sup>1</sup> the workshop included representatives of the social partners and managing authorities from Member States in which social partner capacity building has been identified as a key issue in the 2020 European Semester Country Reports.<sup>2</sup> Using practices from Italy and Poland to generate discussion, the event focused on how learning from different national experiences of social partners capacity building could be maximised in order to ensure improvements in the 2021-27 programming period.

The workshop was designed to give participants ample time for interaction and exchange. Following opening remarks from the European Commission and EU level social partners, the first plenary session explored some of the issues raised by social partners and managing authority representatives from Italy and Poland in presentations that were shared prior to the meeting. Discussion continued in three facilitated groups on the importance of capacity building of social partners, how this could be enhanced under ESF+ and how learning from different national experiences could best be utilised to support this. During the second day of the meeting, participants worked in smaller country groups to look at how learning from practice could be further integrated in programme cycles; they also explored steps that social partners and managing authorities could take together to foster capacity building in their Member States under ESF+.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/sites/esf/files/sp\\_peer\\_review\\_report\\_july\\_3\\_1.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/sites/esf/files/sp_peer_review_report_july_3_1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> These Member States included Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. For full report details, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports_en)

## ESF+ and social partner capacity building

### Key messages

ESF+ regulations foresee partnerships between different stakeholders with specific funding earmarked for social partners.

More structured collaboration between managing authorities and social partners is needed alongside efforts to reinforcement the partnership principle and close the gap between policy and practice.

Social partners seek to contribute fully to agenda-setting in the 2021-27 programming period.

An overview of the current context for social partner capacity building in ESF+ was provided by representatives from the European Commission, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and SMEUnited. In terms of the **regulatory environment**, Article 9 of the **ESF+ regulation**, focuses on partnership and specifically foresees cooperation with and between social partners for capacity-building.<sup>3</sup> **Capacity-building can go beyond traditional cooperation to strengthen activities in all areas covered by the ESF+**, i.e. employment, education and social inclusion. Furthermore, following their identification in country-specific recommendations as part of the European Semester, 0.25 % of national ESF allocations have already been earmarked for capacity-building with social partners<sup>4</sup> in three priority countries (Hungary, Poland and Romania). It was noted, however, that there is room for further collaboration with other Member States.

### ESF+ Regulations: Article 9 - Partnership

1. Member States shall ensure meaningful participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in the delivery of employment, education and social inclusion policies supported by the ESF+ strand under shared management.
2. Member States shall allocate an appropriate amount of their resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management in each programme to capacity building of the social partners and civil society organisations, including in the form of training, networking measures, and strengthening of the social dialogue, and to activities jointly undertaken by the social partners.

Where capacity building of the social partners and civil society organisations is identified by a relevant country-specific recommendation adopted in accordance with Article 121(2) and Article 148(4) [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] TFEU, the Member State concerned shall allocate an appropriate amount of at least 0.25 % of its resources of the ESF+ strand under shared management for that purpose.

Full involvement of social partners is central to implementation of **the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)**.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, there are plans to launch

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the meeting, Article 8 of the Proposal for ESF Regulations related to partnership. In the final ESF+ Regulation, published in the Official Journal of the European Union on June 30 2021, partnership is covered in Article 9. See:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:231:FULL&from=EN>

<sup>4</sup> Although this is a step forward, EU level social partners had hoped to ensure an earmarked budget of 2% for capacity-building with social partners.

<sup>5</sup> [EUR-Lex - 32014R0240 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:231:FULL&from=EN)

a European Community of Practice on Partnership across all Common Provision Regulation Funds<sup>6</sup> for the 2021-27 programming period during which the ECCP will be revised and updated.

**Social partners emphasised that they wish to improve collaboration with ESF managing authorities and activate ESF+ to obtain more support**, particularly in Member States where there are significant gaps between policy and practice. In view of their important knowledge at European, national and subnational levels, social partners are well-placed to **contribute more fully to agenda-setting within the European Semester, but they need support for this**. As efforts across the EU are focused on economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and as the new ESF+ begins, support for capacity building of social partners is more important than ever.

## Lessons from Italy and Poland

The first plenary session of the workshop gave participants the chance to discuss key messages shared by representatives from the trade union CGIL<sup>7</sup>, the employers' organisation Confindustria<sup>8</sup>, the ESF coordination body ANPAL<sup>9</sup> and the Sardinia ESF Managing Authority<sup>10</sup> in Italy, and from the Polish Craft Association<sup>11</sup> and Employers Poland<sup>12</sup> on the practices that they have developed to support social partner capacity building.

### Key lessons from Italian social partner and managing authority representatives:

- Partnership and cohesion policy need to place **more emphasis on the results and the added value of managing authorities, social partners and other stakeholders working together**, with a combined focus on both the participating methods *and* competencies of different partners.
- **Involvement of social partners during programme and project cycles should be continuous** with more efforts to ensure their participation during the **implementation phase** of programme cycles.
- **Social partners should be central to the preparation and management of projects relating to social dialogue with attention paid to their specific needs**, particularly in less developed areas where social partner structures are weaker.
- **Co-ownership, co-creative and peer learning approaches involving social partners, managing authorities and other stakeholders** can help to build long-lasting relationships based on trust.
- **Partnership presents opportunities for promoting cooperation and capacity building at national, regional and local levels**. Capacity building of social partners in the next programming period should be integrated within

<sup>6</sup> Although not included in the Common Provisions Regulation for 2021-27, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) will also form part of the European Community of Practice on Partnership.

<sup>7</sup> Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, <http://www.cgil.it/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.confindustria.it/en>

<sup>9</sup> Agenzia Nazionale Politiche Attive Lavoro (responsible for coordinating ESF): <https://www.anpal.gov.it/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.sardegnaprogrammazione.it/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://zrp.pl/o-nas/o-zrp/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://en.pracodawcyzrp.pl/>

a systematic partnership approach that addresses the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move towards a green and digital economy.

- Good relationships between social partners and managing authorities rest upon the **promotion of values** such as transparency, open communication, constant dialogue and trust.

### Preparing the ESF+ programme in Sardinia, Italy

The ESF Managing Authority in Sardinia has promoted co-ownership with social partners and other stakeholders in the drafting of ESF+ projects. The accessibility of documentation has been a central feature of this approach and has enabled stakeholders to create a common body of knowledge that will be drawn upon during the implementation phase. The draft strategy for the new ESF+ programme was presented to stakeholders such as social partners, civil society organisations and educational bodies for feedback, and to the wider public via the Managing Authority's website. Stakeholders used a variety of tools, including workshops to share their experiences and highlight promising practices, and surveys to identify areas of improvement.

### Key lessons from Polish social partner representatives:

- **The impact of specific national and regulatory contexts** on support for social partner capacity building is important to acknowledge. In the 2014-20 programming period, there was no direct support for social partner capacity building and many projects faced implementation difficulties due to complex administrative requirements such as value-added tax regulations. However, since the Polish Managing Authority has allocated more funds to the forthcoming ESF+ programme<sup>13</sup>, the hope is that progress on social dialogue will become more systematic moving forward. **Greater involvement is needed at different levels** to strengthen capacity so that social partners are able to provide feedback on drafts of national and transnational bills and regulations relating to business and labour.
- While there are some advances in partnerships between national social partner organisations and associations, **more efforts are needed to improve the capacity of national organisations to actively participate in social dialogue and legislative processes at European level.**
- Poland also needs to improve its standing at EU level and to further engage with more EU institutions, including the European Commission and European Parliament.

### Summary of proposal prepared by social partners for ESF+ in Poland

1. Participation of social partners in public policymaking in the labour market field
2. Implementation of educational programmes and information campaigns that promote knowledge about social dialogue
3. More diverse social partner representation
4. Programmes oriented towards promotion of health and safety at work by social partners
5. Preparation of social partner representatives as educational coordinators and animators in their work environments

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<sup>13</sup> 0.5% of the total budget of this programme will be allocated to supporting social and civil dialogue.

6. Increase digital competencies of social partner representatives
7. Development of proposed solutions for responding to crisis situations in the labour market by social partners
8. Programmes oriented towards creation of high-quality workplaces by building support for reconciliation of professional and private roles, equal opportunities in the workplace, bridging the wage gap, and inclusion of disadvantaged groups
9. Support by Polish social partners for implementation of the European Accessibility Act

## How to enhance and improve social partner capacity building in ESF+

### Key messages

Joint action is essential for recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the European labour market.

Participation of social partners is necessary at all stages of the programming cycle, from agenda setting to evaluation.

Collaboration between managing authorities and social partners should allow for experimentation to encourage social innovation.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel - many interesting and transferable experiences already exist.

Participants worked in facilitated groups to explore how social partner capacity building could be improved. The following questions were used to steer their discussions:

- Why is capacity building support for social partners so essential in the context of ESF+?
- How can capacity building support for social partners be enhanced and reinforced by managing authorities and social partners under ESF+?
- Which social partner capacity building practices can we learn from and why?

### Why capacity building support for social partners is essential in the context of ESF+

Due to their work in these areas on the ground and their closeness to the challenges there, social partners are central stakeholders on economic and social issues. Support for social partner capacity building can:

- Enable the development of shared definitions, expectations and actions
- Encourage better, reliable, and more mature social partner positions in the framework of social dialogue
- Create better understanding and build trust among stakeholders
- Support managing authorities to make effective use of funds with approaches that prevent and overcome inequalities

Participants noted a range of challenges that limit support for social partner capacity building and shared possible solutions for addressing these.

### Challenges

- Ensuring representativeness and legitimacy of social partners

### Proposed solutions

- Improved representativeness and status of social partners

- Balancing economic and social priorities
- Impact of COVID-19 on the labour market
- Guaranteeing long-term sustainability of projects and achieving results
- How to jointly manage issues related to Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3)<sup>14</sup> and design future programmes
- Identifying needs at local, regional, national and transnational levels
- Ensuring connections across localities for multi-level governance
- Greater trust by managing authorities in capabilities of social partners with use of options such as operational grants
- More transparent procedures for allocation of resources, planning of funding priorities, calls for proposals, etc.
- Involvement of social partners in policy development and implementation at all levels with training to enable their active participation in policymaking
- Design and management processes that focus on intermediate results
- Data gathering and information sharing at different levels of governance
- Encouragement of experimentation in ESF+ collaboration
- Reinforcement of multi-governance and learning connections

## Learning from social partner capacity building practices

The importance of **structured learning** processes to enhance support for capacity building was highlighted by participants. Suggestions were made for **the development of a common learning framework** on capacity building across Member States which was managed by an **intermediary agency able to manage and facilitate knowledge exchange** on this theme. It was also noted that exchanges of experience should take place vertically (between practice and policy levels) and horizontally (between peers). Other ideas for improved learning from practice included the establishment of local/regional networks that could bridge the specific aims of managing authorities and social partners, and the sharing of information from ESF committee meetings through online sessions in order to connect the needs of social partners with ESF+. It was further observed that useful learning could be derived from sharing practices that had not gone well. The need to **share learning outside of traditional departmental or organisational silos** was also highlighted with calls for dissemination efforts that are better targeted for wider audiences. Finally, mention was made of the fact that **many useful learning experiences from previous programming periods already exist**, and these should be further drawn upon and shared.

The learning theme was further explored in small groups on the second day of the workshop with a focus on how promising practices could be transferred to other country contexts. All participants agreed that, as country contexts are diverse, there are no 'copy and paste solutions'. **Rather than seeking to replicate, the idea is to learn from useful practices and raise awareness of the benefits of social dialogue**, particularly from those countries that have more experience of working in this area.

<sup>14</sup> Smart specialisation strategies in the entrepreneurial discovery process are being promoted so that the European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF) can be used more efficiently and synergies between different EU, national and regional policies, as well as public and private investments can be increased (see Cohesion Policy 2014-20: [smart specialisation en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/economic-affairs/sites/economic-affairs/files/2014/12/smart_specialisation_en.pdf)).

With regard to **how managing authorities and social partners can work together to learn from other contexts**, it was noted that managing authorities should liaise with both employers' associations and trade unions, and that **smaller social partner organisations should be included** in order to ensure that expertise 'trickles down' to benefit everyone. The **importance of mutual learning events** in which practices are shared, was also highlighted.

## Going forwards: Enhancing capacity building in ESF+

Country-based working group discussions on the second day of the event centred on the **concrete steps that participants from managing authorities and social partners might take to foster capacity building in their countries using ESF+**. Key suggestions included:

- **Planning for long-term sustainability:** Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate transition, both managing authorities and social partners should work together to ensure effective adaptation to new circumstances.
- **Deeper collaboration:** Across Europe, managing authorities and social partners should work together on an equal footing, co-designing and co-planning collaborative programmes that benefit citizens. Member States with more developed structures for social dialogue could share their expertise with others, and options such as twinning between managing authorities to support peer learning could be considered.
- **Clarity around representation:** The importance of including a diverse range of partners should be made clearer in the new ECCP. This will assist in ensuring that funding is not consistently given to the same partners. More seed funding opportunities are also needed for smaller, less experienced organisations.
- **Links between social partners and civil society organisations:** In view of their common interest in improved capacity building, opportunities for social partners and civil society organisations to liaise more closely and enhance efforts to promote this may be useful.
- **Focus of capacity building:** ESF+ funding should be used to expand the analytical, technical and administrative capacities of social partners. As well as developing skills to support particular processes such as monitoring and evaluation, the importance of enhancing digital skills was also noted.<sup>15</sup>

### Some examples of capacity building development

In **Greece**, a documentation office is being set up to facilitate resource planning, forecasts and the evaluation of progress.

In **Cyprus**, workplace safety regulations have been updated and collaboration is being sought to translate these into English.

In **Hungary**, there is a focus on better training (incl. training material, design of training cycles) for social partners.

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<sup>15</sup> See: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/topic/skills-and-training>

## Conclusions

Participants indicated that the key lessons they would take away from the event included a common need for joint action, the need for structured transnational cooperation mechanisms and the strengthening of social partner dialogue as an essential part of policymaking. These lessons were echoed in the closing remarks of speakers from the European Commission, BusinessEurope and SGI Europe who reinforced the fact that capacity building is linked to dialogue within and between local, regional, national and EU levels, and to strong relationships between national and regional managing authorities and social partners.

### Building relationships of trust

Throughout the workshop, participants mentioned that trust between different stakeholders was essential for meaningful collaboration. As well as acknowledging the time for relationship-building, it was also noted that co-creation processes can assist in generating the mutual respect that leads to trust.

Emphasis on multilevel governance and the partnership principle suggests that better implementation of the ECCP could do much to enhance and improve support for social partner capacity building in the ESF+. The key findings and conclusions from the workshop coincide with the six key principles promoted by the ECCP:

- 1. Representation:** Emphasis should be placed on ensuring greater diversity in partner selection. To do this, ESF+ managing authorities should liaise with both types of social partners - employers' associations and trade unions. Efforts should also be made to integrate local voices and promote bottom-up approaches.
- 2. Transparency:** Managing authorities should provide clear guidance on opportunities to input into programme design and implementation with accessible documentation and feedback procedures.
- 3. Continuous and active involvement:** More active and continuous forms of social partner participation should be encouraged in ESF+ programmes and projects, particularly during implementation processes.
- 4. Institutional strengthening:** ESF+ resources should be used strategically to support social partners to engage more deeply in policymaking processes, collaborate better with managing authorities and to interact more meaningfully at national and EU level.
- 5. Participatory review and reflection:** More innovative forms of partnership review should be developed with a focus on the added value of partnership that is derived from both the process of partnering and the achievement of results.
- 6. Exchange and learning:** Structured networking between managing authorities and social partners produces new insights and enhances knowledge-sharing. More creative avenues for mutual exchange and learning, in which participants prioritise learning methods and select relevant learning practices for each context, should be encouraged.