



Mid-term evaluation of the EU programme for employment and social innovation - EaSI

Executive summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion appointed ICF Consulting Limited to carry out a mid-term evaluation¹ of the EU programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI)².

The EaSI programme aims to promote a high level of quality and sustainable employment, guarantee adequate and decent social protection, combat social exclusion and poverty, and improve working conditions. The total budget for 2014-2020 is EUR 919,469,000. The programme includes three axes:

- The PROGRESS axis (61% of the total budget) focuses on providing support to policy making and implementation through: producing policy evidence, organising information sharing and mutual learning activities, creating better conditions for social innovations and providing capacity building support to EU-level and national organisations.
- The EURES axis (18% of the total budget) facilitates geographical mobility in the EU by providing information and services for jobseekers and employers, and through targeted mobility schemes
- The Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship axis (21% of the total budget) supports the access to microcredit for vulnerable persons³ and micro-enterprises and the institutional capacity of microcredit providers.

The purpose of the mid-term evaluation was to measure the progress made in relation to the programme's objectives, to determine whether the resources of the programme have been used efficiently and to assess its Union added value. The evaluation further aimed to recommend adjustments to the way the programme is currently run, in order to improve its performance in the second part of its implementation, and contribute to the preparation of the post 2020 period.

The scope of the evaluation covered the activities undertaken under the three axes of EaSI from January 2014 until December 2016 in the EU Member States and other participating countries.

Methodological approach and limitations

The evaluation questions covered five evaluation criteria in compliance with the Better Regulation Guidelines: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU added-value⁴. In order to cover each criterion, the evaluation questions were grouped under a number of leading topics. Additionally, structure and process of the EaSI governance were analysed. An evaluation framework that included key questions, sub questions, indicators and judgment criteria was also developed.

Several sources of evidence were used for answering the evaluation questions:

- Interviews and desk research: this included scoping interviews with key actors at EU level (10) and conducting secondary data analysis, which included existing evaluations, implementation and contextual data. Further to this, 51 semi structured interviews with key actors were conducted, to capture their opinion on specific issues (45 as part of the case studies and 6 follow-up interviews).

¹The EaSI mid-term evaluation was launched in compliance with Article Art 13 of the EaSI Regulation.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1081>

³ According to the EaSI Regulation, eligible vulnerable persons include those who have lost or are at risk of losing their job, have difficulty in entering or re-entering the labour market, are at risk of social exclusion or socially excluded, are in a disadvantaged position with regard to access to the conventional credit market, and who wish to start up or develop their own micro- enterprises.

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/better-regulation-guidelines.pdf>

- Case studies: 15 in-depth cases studies were completed (7 under PROGRESS, 4 under EURES and 4 under Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship) to show a focused and detailed experience on project application processes and their subsequent implementation. This involved gathering and analysing available documentation as well as interviews with relevant stakeholders.
- Open public consultation: an open public consultation was launched for 12 weeks to capture the stakeholders' opinions and views. The consultation provided a wider evidence base than that available from case-specific sources as it contained evidence from those not involved in the design and delivery of specific projects.
- Focus group: a focus group was conducted with EaSI committee members to gather opinions, particularly with regard to the programme's governance structure and process. Additionally, the focus group discussed issues such as the internal and external coherence, and the efficiency of EaSI.
- Beneficiaries' survey: a survey of beneficiaries was also carried out to capture the beneficiaries' feedback on the programme. This survey complemented the existing surveys and contextual data and covered additional questions arising from the secondary data analysis.

The methodological tools had some limitations. Regarding desk research, few projects were finalised by 2016 and several projects analysed were still ongoing; consequently information about the effectiveness and efficiency of the activities is scarce. With regard to the case studies, the availability and quality of evidence varies for each case, some of them presenting only emerging findings. The open public consultation provided overall limited results, due to a relatively small number of responses. Similarly, a generalisation of results of the beneficiaries' survey was not possible due to the small number of replies.

These gaps were overcome by combining different qualitative and quantitative methods, and by indicating systematically the data sources.

Evaluation results

The mid-term evaluation assessed the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value and the governance of the EaSI programme. This executive summary outlines the main findings by evaluation theme.

Relevance

The evaluation confirmed the continuing relevance of the EaSI objectives, particularly in light of the current challenging socio-economic context, which has been characterised by the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis - with positive but slow recovery - and recent political events likely to impact the EU for years to come. For instance, with a large influx of migrants to EU Member States, the number of vulnerable people has drastically increased, making their successful integration one of the highest priorities across the EU in the next years.

The evaluation put forward that EaSI is relevant in facilitating solutions for several challenges, by providing support to vulnerable groups (i.e. young people, long-term unemployed, disabled, migrants, ethnic minorities and women), producing innovative actions, and making labour and financial markets more accessible.

The evaluation findings suggest that the EaSI programme should continue to prioritise the following objectives for the next programming period:

- Sustain and promote the exchange of good practices between policy-makers across the programme's participating countries by delivering mutual-learning, awareness raising and dissemination activities. Mainstreaming the programme's results at the operative level facilitates awareness of innovative practices, in addition to capacity development of national and local actors.

- Continue to support EU-wide networks in the fields of social protection, and accessible and efficient labour markets, with the aim to align different policy agendas across different levels of governance and the programme's participating countries.
- Reinforce the focus on vulnerable groups, such as migrants, youth, women and people with disabilities. Analytical tools, dissemination events and innovative projects should also take into account gender, youth unemployment, inequalities and social exclusion issues. PROGRESS and Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship axes can play an important role in this process by facilitating access to finance for vulnerable groups, whereas the EURES axis should continue to fund targeted projects (for example, 'Your first EURES job scheme' and cross-border partnerships).
- Introduce more flexibility in the budget allocation across the axes and allow more room for manoeuvre in designing the calls for proposals, so that feedback from stakeholders can be adequately and timely taken into account.

Effectiveness

The EaSI programme as a whole has achieved good quality outcomes but in limited quantity, given the short timeframe. There were several positive outcomes that occurred due to the EaSI intervention: (i) an increase in awareness and information about EU policy efforts in the area of social inclusion and poverty reduction; (ii) improved perception of cross-border employment and a raised awareness of regional employers and job-seekers regarding the cross-border potential; (iii) broader , rapid testing and implementation of innovative measures; (iv) increased access to finance and capacity building opportunities in the microfinance and social entrepreneurship sectors; (v) facilitated policy changes through research, exchange and building of advocacy capacity, helping non-governmental actors to influence the formulation and implementation of EU policies.

Barriers to achieving the programme's goals derived from heavy administrative requirements for accessing funds and limited funding and lack of follow-up mechanisms. The latter applied in particular to the tested social innovations under PROGRESS, but also for the EURES and Microfinance/ Social Entrepreneurship projects.

The three axes differ in terms of effectiveness in generating outcomes, achieving objectives and in bringing about change:

- PROGRESS is most effective in facilitating effective information-sharing, mutual learning and dialogue, in developing and disseminating comparative analytical knowledge.
- EURES is effective in contributing to a transparent labour market; however, the participating countries share only around half of their vacancies on the EURES portal. With regard to services provision, one successful activity was the development of cross-border info points.
- Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship has contributed to an increase in availability and access to finance for microenterprises and social enterprises. Financial intermediaries have involved vulnerable groups in their activities, but important discrepancies persist between participating countries.

Several recommendations were outlined on how to effectively achieve project goals and improve stakeholder involvement:

- Maintain the thematic focus on those policy themes relevant for and appreciated by stakeholders, while facilitating partnership development and ensuring a balanced representation of participating countries in the consortia. This should be done by implementing effective methods and a more targeted approach that involves stakeholders.

- Specifically for PROGRESS, reinforce the dissemination of comparative and analytical knowledge by enhancing event outreach and supporting investment in analytical tools (datasets, statistics, and focused studies).
- For EURES, ensure that Member States post vacancies on the EURES job portal, for example, by setting targets per country and ensure a more balanced representation of Member States' jobseekers and employers on the portal. With regard to the provision of services, a longer implementation period should be facilitated for those projects where it is currently one year, in order to enable stakeholders to implement the activity, measure its effectiveness and ensure its sustainability.
- With regard to Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship, include more vulnerable groups in the activities, for instance, by integrating a number/ quota of targeted vulnerable persons in proposal requirements.

Efficiency

The EaSI budget remains appropriate, but flexibility should be ensured in order to amplify its economic and social impacts. Similarly, long-term financing would enable organisations to create more impact and promote better working conditions, to fight against unemployment as well as to decrease poverty and exclusion.

EaSI funds are difficult for small Member States to tap into mainly because of limited capacity and knowledge of EaSI compared to larger Members States, which build upon predecessors' programmes and are able to dedicate more human resources to support programme implementation.

The analysis of the three axes reveals that while the budget allocation for the PROGRESS and EURES axes remains sufficient, for Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship, the budget allocation is insufficient.

Based on this, key conclusions and recommendations are:

- Introduce changes in the awarding and implementation process, in order to support smaller Member States by minimising administrative burden at both the bidding and implementation stages.
- Ensure a more flexible budget re-allocation between the three axes in order to cover potential budget gaps across the axes.

Coherence

There is mitigated evidence that the merge and subsequent formulation of the programme improved the consistency and flexibility of EaSI, in addition to contributing to its complementarity with other funds and initiatives. The different data collected suggest that the three axes operate rather independently. Nevertheless, findings suggest that some synergies between the axes exist. For example, PROGRESS supports the Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship axis by funding mutual learning in the areas of microfinance and social entrepreneurship. PROGRESS also funded mutual learning activities among EURES actors and training of EURES advisers. There is further coherence between the PROGRESS and EURES axes as some labour mobility topics (specific for EURES) are financed under PROGRESS. For example, in the policy area of working conditions, EaSI and its predecessor PROGRESS have funded national and transnational cooperation projects through calls for proposals on posting of workers, and awareness raising, dissemination and outreach activities on the Youth Guarantee. Additionally, PICUM (one of the EaSI-PROGRESS supported EU-level NGO networks) regularly contributes to an improved evaluation of the legal texts in the area of undeclared work.

Regarding external coherence with other EU programmes, EaSI is mostly coherent with ESF. As regards the axes, PROGRESS and other EU programmes such as ESF, Erasmus+, and Horizon 2020 are indeed complementary to each other in terms of specific

objectives, activities and beneficiaries. Complementarity between EURES and the European Territorial Co-operation programme (Interreg) was also found. The EaSI Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship axis also appears coherent with other MF-instruments at the EU-level (e.g. COSME, InnovFIN).

At a national level, no overlap between the objectives of EaSI and the objectives of national level instruments/programmes could be identified. The stakeholder consultations highlighted an important consensus on the importance of maintaining each type of instruments at EU level.

Based on this, it is recommended to:

- Strengthen the EaSI umbrella through reinforced mutual synergies between the three axes.
- The EaSI programme should further strengthen national, regional and local authorities' involvement participation in the delivery of EaSI activities by providing those stakeholders with more analytical tools, transferable knowledge and support for the design and implementation of activities.

EU Added Value

The EU added value of the EaSI programme is widely acknowledged, in particular with regards to EU-wide partnerships and the exchange of good practices. EaSI is able to support projects with a larger scope compared to what is possible at the national level. For example, one of the key features of PROGRESS is to be the most suitable to build EU level networks and partnership as well as to produce EU wide deliverables that are not top priority at other governance level, such as databases, studies, policy experimentations, capacity building and mutual learning activities.

Should EaSI be discontinued, this would have wide repercussions. For instance, it would be unlikely that other funding schemes at a national or regional level would be able to support social experimentations across EaSI participating countries (as is currently the case with the PROGRESS axis). Moreover, there are no comparable funds available for cross-border partnerships that are currently supported under the EURES axis. With regard to Microfinance/Social Entrepreneurship, support for the social investment market would most likely slow down without funding from EaSI, leading to fewer micro-enterprises and social enterprises across the EU and thus fewer employment opportunities in these sectors.

There is room for improvement at the awareness level of the EaSI-umbrella and with regard to certain particular aspects, for example the awareness of social innovation/experimentation and social entrepreneurship issues.

On the basis of the findings it is recommended to:

- Continue to invest in those fields (e.g. cross-border partnerships, social experimentations or knowledge sharing in the fields of employment, social protection, labour mobility and social enterprises) where national-level funding is insufficient or where these activities are not always a priority in terms of scope and scale at a national or regional level.
- Improve the communication on EaSI activities and the dissemination of information on the programme's results i.e. through country specific examples, good practices, a more up to date website, and making contents more accessible to a broader audience.

Governance

Findings with regard to governance suggest that the EaSI committee members would like to be more involved in decision making and to see the frequency of the meetings increased. Related to this, EaSI committee members feel that their role in acting as a catalyst for EaSI is hindered by the fact that they do not have enough information on projects implemented in their Member States. This could be improved by the committee

members receiving more timely information from DG EMPL, in addition to establishing a portal with real time information about projects awarded. Indeed, an internet-based knowledge management system has been advocated as the main improvement that would allow the committee members to effectively fulfil their role as points of contact and 'coordinators' of EaSI at the national level.

Additionally, there is a need for more regular 'stocktaking' but and 'forward-looking' discussions between the EaSI committee and the Commission, as well as with other EU Committees, in particular SPC and EMCO. Ultimately, the EaSI Committee could be a place for peer learning so that small participating countries that at the moment experience difficulties in accessing EaSI funding could benefit from the experiences of other countries. This could be achieved by adapting the meeting to serve also as a platform for networking and exchange of good practices.

General conclusion

Overall, the rationale and objectives of EaSI remain relevant to address current and future challenges in the fields of employment and social inclusion, including the effects of the economic, financial and refugee crisis, in addition to unemployment, and poverty and social exclusion.

Several shortcomings were identified, in particular with regard to the effective and efficient use of monetary inputs and the flexibility of budget allocation between the axes and project duration. These need to be addressed to ensure a sustainable implementation of EaSI funded projects in the long term.

Finally, the EU added value of EaSI is indisputable, since the programme addresses several EU-wide actions that cannot be addressed on a national level in terms of scale and scope. However, the programme outcomes need to be better communicated to different stakeholders across the EU to ensure a better understanding and visibility of the EaSI programme activities and results. The role of the EaSI Committee could be further developed to ensure a better dialogue among participating countries.

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