



'Government Task Forces for more holistic, inclusive and knowledge-based policies'

Case study of an Estonian ESF project under the study 'Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration' (PAPA)

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Government task forces for more holistic, inclusive and knowledge-based policies

Operational Programme	Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020 (CCI 2014EE16M3OP001), priority axis 12 'Administrative Capacity', specific objective 12.2, 'Improve policy development process through introducing mechanisms and tools for more holistic, inclusive and knowledge-based policies'
Beneficiary organisation	Government Office, Republic of Estonia
Target groups	Policy makers (including non-governmental interest groups and experts) and policy implementers who belong to the policy field covered by a Task Force
Project duration	01/03/2014 – 31/12/2023
Budget	EUR 2,200,000 (EU contribution: EUR 1,870,000)
Project manager (email address)	Henry Kattago, Strategy Director, Government Office (henry.kattago@riigikantselei.ee)
Partners	Government ministries that are involved in establishing and managing specific Task Forces
Project/ organisation website	https://www.riigikantselei.ee/et/rakkeruhmad

This case study was produced as part of the project 'Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration', contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project is to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration for the purposes of accountability. This report recounts the story of the ESF-supported activity of establishing **Government Task Forces in Estonia**. It discusses the context and purpose of the project; the characteristics of the team implementing it; the main challenges faced and difficulties encountered during its implementation; key developments during the implementation process; the results and impacts achieved; as well as the lessons learnt and the contribution of the ESF.

GOVERNMENT TASK FORCES FOR MORE HOLISTIC, INCLUSIVE AND KNOWLEDGE-BASED POLICIES

In early 2012, Tiia Randma, education adviser to the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, received an invitation that was hard to resist – to devise and lead the first ever Estonian Government Task Force. This was a high-level experiment initiated by the Strategy Unit of the Government Office, with the aim of improving the coordination of complex policy problems in Estonia. The first Task Force was intended to tackle a mismatch between the skills of the workforce in Estonia and the needs of the labour-market. Ms. Randma was known as a dedicated professional with strong leadership capabilities, as well as an understanding of the Estonian education and training system and the functioning of the labour market. The invitation provided her with an opportunity to tackle the crucial issue of workforce skills with a mandate from the Government and the support of the Government Office.

After intensive discussions with stakeholders and deliberations on the aims of the Task Force, the Government approved the establishment of the 'Task Force on Skills Development' in June, and it was formally gathered by the Secretary of the State in September 2012. The mission of the new body was to develop a plan and propose concrete measures to ensure the availability of a workforce in Estonia with skills that matched the needs of the local labour market. Under Randma's leadership, the Task Force had just under two years to develop a plan that determined the roles and responsibilities of various ministries and government institutions in responding to the needs of the labour market, as well as providing a well-targeted financial plan for implementing the measures. After some intensive work and learning along the way, the Task Force concluded its activities in June 2014, as prescribed by the Government mandate. By 2019, the activities initiated by the Task Force have developed into a complex system of coordination that brings together stakeholders to analyse Estonia's needs for workforce and skills from a ten-year perspective¹. Tiia Randma still leads the work, which is now based within the Estonian Qualifications Authority.

The establishment of the first Task Force on Skills Development in 2012 drew on a realisation that to achieve an increase in affluence across Estonia, the productivity of Estonian enterprises needed to grow significantly – and that would require a skilled workforce. However, several problems existed with regard to the availability and qualifications of the workforce. For example, as noted in the National Reform Programme 'Estonia 2020', in 2011 almost one-third (31%) of Estonia's workforce lacked any form of professional education (vocational or higher)². At the same time, the Government's responses to issues in the workforce were fragmented. The matter was complex and demanded a coordinated approach, but it fell between the areas of governance of different ministries.

The problems of coordination in this policy area reflected the segmented nature of the Estonian administrative system as a whole. Estonia operated an administrative structure in which responsibility for public policies and programmes lay with individual ministries³. Those horizontal

¹ See: <https://oska.kutsekoda.ee/en/>.

² National Reform Programme 'ESTONIA 2020', approved by the Government on 28 April 2011. Available at: https://www.riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/national_reform_programme_estonia_2020_2011.pdf.

³ Sarapuu, K. (2011), 'Post-Communist Development of Administrative Structure in Estonia: From Fragmentation to Segmentation'. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 35 (4), pp. 54-73.

coordination mechanisms that were built into the system (consultation of draft regulations, management of the EU affairs, etc.) were based on network-type cooperation, and reinforced the central role of ministries in deciding government policies. Horizontal, systemic functions were shared between a number of institutions – the Government Office was charged with supporting the Prime Minister (PM), coordinating EU affairs and the implementation of government strategies; the Ministry of Finance was responsible for the budgetary process, regional development and the development of government administration; and the Ministry of Justice took care of legal policy, including regulatory impact analysis.

The roots of such a system lay in the country's initial transition after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, when the whole system of governance was de-institutionalised⁴. The great uncertainty, enormous workload and intense pressure of time felt during that period led to the introduction of a decentralised problem-solving approach. This was further bolstered by a desire to overthrow the Soviet legacy of a vast and centralised public administration. The latter point meant that the political elite was very cautious towards any manifestation of central harmonisation. By the time Estonia began to prepare for membership of the European Union, its segmented system had become institutionalised – a fact that was reflected in the way in which the accession process was organised. Although such a system promoted clear accountability for a number of policy issues, as well as the accumulation of professional knowledge within individual institutions, difficulties emerged in ensuring the coherence of different policies, in solving problems that affected several areas of government, and in agreeing joint solutions to deal with complex policy problems. During the post-accession period, problems relating to the segmented nature of Estonian public administration became more and more evident.

In 2011, the OECD published its Public Governance Review of Estonia. This report concluded that the country operated a fragmented and decentralised public administration, and urged that 'Estonian public administration needs to learn to work as a single government to design, implement and sustain the government's policy priorities and to help meet new challenges on the horizon'⁵. The OECD issued a recommendation to 'strengthen the stewardship role and capacity of the Centre of Government to build agreement around strategic priorities and to identify and enable leaders within the public administration to develop and deliver on horizontal policy initiatives'⁶.

Although the report offered few new insights to those familiar with the workings of the Estonian system, and relied heavily on information and opinion provided by local experts, it changed the discourse on governance in Estonia. This resulted in a formal plan by the Government to implement the recommendations of the report⁷. Importantly, along several suggestions for increasing the capabilities of the Estonian public administration to deal with complex policy problems, the OECD proposed the use of temporary task forces to address 'complex or urgent developments in policy or service delivery that cut across many parts of government', adding that the Government Office was in a 'unique position' to be able to convene such novel

⁴ Sarapuu, K. (2012), 'Administrative Structure in Times of Changes: The Development of Estonian Ministries and Government Agencies 1990-2010.' *International Journal of Public Administration*, 35 (12), pp. 808-819.

⁵ OECD (2011), *Estonia: Towards a Single Government Approach. Assessment and Recommendations*. Paris: OECD, p. 5.

⁶ OECD (2011), p. 66.

⁷ Action plan for implementation of OECD Public Governance Reviews, Approved by the Cabinet on 13 October 2011. Available at: https://www.riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/oezd_pgc_review_estonia_action_plan.pdf.

coordinating bodies⁸. In 2012, the first Government Task Force, focusing on skills development, was created as an experiment. In 2013, another followed, focusing on injuries and premature death.

The introduction of Task Forces was coordinated by the Government Office's Strategy Unit. The Unit was established under the leadership of Keit Kasemets in spring 2006, in order to support the planning of Government work and to coordinate the drawing up and implementation of the Government Programme. In addition, the Unit devised macro-level strategic plans to increase Estonia's competitiveness and sustainable development. During the first years of its existence, the Unit focused very much on improving the key 'documents' of the Government – the Government Programme and the National Competitiveness Strategy. In subsequent years, however, the Unit's emphasis shifted to embrace Estonia's overall governance capacity, as well as new tasks supporting the growth of analytical and policy-making capacity within public administration. The importing of the OECD's 2011 report and implementing its conclusions reflects this drive towards better policy-making, which created both the basis and a reference point for the activities that followed.

Both the 2011 OECD Public Governance Review and the first two Task Forces were financed by the ESF within the framework of the Operational Programme for Human Resource Development 2007-2013, under the Priority Axis 'Enhancing administrative capacity'. Due to these experiences being encouraging, the 2014-2020 Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds already contained a separate activity under the Priority Axis 'Administrative capacity', with the objective of improving the policy-making process⁹. In order to make policy-making more 'holistic, engaging and knowledge-based', the 2014-2020 programme foresees task forces and expert groups being established 'to solve strategic challenges requiring the cooperation of several ministries, government levels and/or sectors, with the aim of finding more efficient solutions for the state as a whole in cooperation'¹⁰.

The activities of the specific objective are implemented by the Strategy Unit of the Government Office, in cooperation with other institutions. Although the intervention lists both 'task forces' and 'expert groups', these are different in nature. Task Forces are established by the decision of the Government, which means they have a Government mandate and a duty to present the results of their work to the Government for approval. Expert groups are established by a joint decision of the secretaries-general of the ministries. While Task Forces address complex cross-sectoral policy issues over which there is no lead ministry, expert groups work on more specific policy issues that demand horizontal cooperation. Also, the timeframes within which the bodies work differ. The operation of Task Forces is longer (usually 1.5-2 years), while expert groups are of shorter duration. The rest of this case study focuses only on the Government Task Forces as a significant horizontal, high-level policy-making instrument. Since 2012, eight such Task Forces have been established (six under the 2014-2020 programming period) to improve

⁸ OECD (2011), p. 31.

⁹ Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020. Available at: https://www.strukturifondid.ee/sites/default/files/oigusaktid/operational_programme_for_cohesion_policy_funds_2014-2020_211218.pdf.

¹⁰ Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020, p. 168.

coordination and assign responsibilities to various actors within complex policy areas deemed to be of strategic importance.

Government Task Forces: Design and execution of the project

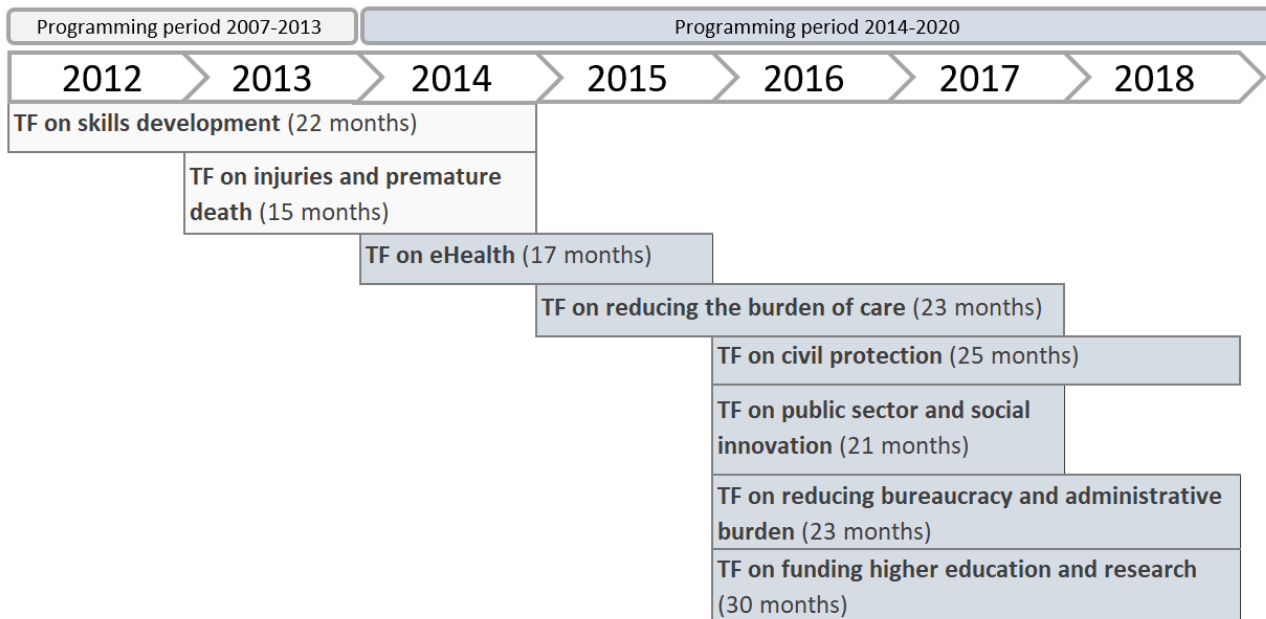
Purpose of the Task Forces

According to the 2011 OECD Public Governance Review, problems were 'solved inside fields of governance' and cooperation was regarded as 'unnecessary bureaucracy' within the Estonian public administration¹¹. As one interviewee described, Estonia was governed in silos, with the 'grey area' between ministries being a 'no man's land'. Taking the OECD's criticism and suggestions on board, the Strategy Unit of the Government Office, led by Keit Kasemets, soon established the initial two temporary Government Task Forces. Keit Kasemets, the first Director of Strategy, had a background in EU affairs and previously served as Director of EU Affairs within the Government Office.

Estonia's accession to the EU had been an important learning experience, increasing understanding of the importance of policy coordination in the country. The institutional structure for coordinating EU affairs had evolved into a robust and functional system. Furthermore, the positive experience of having responsibility for coordinating EU affairs located in close proximity to the Prime Minister legitimised the role of the Government Office in wider policy coordination. Together with the staff of the Strategy Unit, Keit Kasemets aimed to target the 'grey areas' by creating a coordination tool that would encourage stakeholders to cooperate, coordinate their activities and determine the responsibility of relevant actors. Positive experiences with the two Task Forces financed from the 2007-2013 operational programme led to the delineation of a special activity in the 2014-2020 operational programme, and, under the leadership of the following Directors of Strategy and Strategy Unit's staff, the establishment of six further Task Forces by 2019 (see Figure 1).

¹¹ OECD (2011), *Estonia: Towards a Single Government Approach. Assessment and Recommendations*. Paris: OECD.

Figure 1. Timeline of Government Task Forces



Source: Compiled by the authors.

Although the eight Government Task Forces have tackled very different topics, with the task and function of each shaped by its specific policy area, the overall purpose and format has remained largely unchanged. Namely, to direct a concerted effort towards sustainable solutions to strategically important long-term issues in society that span across ministries, government levels and societal sectors¹². By bringing together the relevant ministries and government agencies, local authorities, experts, non-governmental and private sector organisations, Task Forces encourage cooperation and create an environment in which open discussion can take place. The aim of establishing a Task Force has been to increase the effectiveness of cross-sectoral cooperation in solving horizontal policy problems, ‘without getting tangled in established, rigid areas of responsibility and funding arrangements’¹³. It is envisaged that the results of every Task Force should be integrated into the daily work of relevant ministries and agencies – and, where necessary, should result in relevant changes to legislation, Government strategic development plans, and procedures¹⁴.

The aims for Government Task Forces described above derive directly from Priority Axis 12, ‘Administrative Capacity’, in the Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020 (CCI 2014EE16M3OP001).¹⁵ According to the explanation of Priority Axis 12, the main problems

¹² Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020, p. 168. Available at: https://www.strukturifondid.ee/sites/default/files/oigusaktid/operational_programme_for_cohesion_policy_funds_2014-2020_211218.pdf.

¹³ Government Office (2017), Explanatory note for the Directive of priority goal 12, ‘Administrative capacity’, measure 12.2 ‘Developing the quality of policy-making’, p. 6. Available at: https://www.rahendusministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/2017.12.22_politikakujundamise_meetme_seletuskiri.003.pdf.

¹⁴ Government Office (2017), Explanatory note for the Directive of the priority goal 12 ‘Administrative capacity’ measure 12.2 ‘Developing the quality of policy-making’, p. 33.

¹⁵ Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020. Available at:

facing public governance require the ability to tackle pressing problems, to set priorities, provide solutions, distribute tasks and responsibilities, and to cooperate. Government Task Forces are designed to enhance all of these abilities. The activity of Government Task Forces supports the achievement of Specific Objective (SO) 12.2, 'Improve policy development process through introducing mechanisms and tools for more holistic, inclusive and knowledge-based policies'. This activity corresponds to the common result indicator of SO 12.2 (Number of policy initiatives launched as a result of ESF supported activities for cooperation, involvement and better use of information).

Altogether, SO 12.2 comprises five sub-goals and seven activities¹⁶. The activity of the Task Forces belongs under the second sub-goal, 'Providing sustainable solutions to long-term problems that are strategically important for the government'. In practice, however, it contributes to all of the goals of SO 12.2. The Directive regulating the implementation of SO 12.2 accords the Task Force format a high level of flexibility by allowing ESF funds to finance not only the management of the Task Force, but also the commissioning of relevant analyses, impact assessments, international comparisons, the creation of new methodologies, surveys and other relevant information, the organising of study trips, seminars and consulting with international experts¹⁷. Several of these items are also funded as individual activities under other sub-goals of SO 12.2. For example, commissioning impact assessments to support greater knowledge-based decision-making, organising study trips and improving the involvement of non-governmental partners via cooperation projects are all individual projects under the various sub-goals of SO 12.2. As highlighted by our interviewees, Government Task Forces can therefore be seen as a compound of the activities supported under SO 12.2.

The design of Government Task Forces

Although previous efforts have been made to improve coordination and cooperation within the Estonian public sector prior to the creation of the Government Task Forces, the results of such efforts were often limited to a specific policy field, or remained uneven¹⁸. Compared to the other coordination tools, Government Task Forces possess a unique combination of six critical traits.

First, Task Forces address policy problems that are multi-faceted, cross-sectoral and strategically important to the Government.

Second, Task Forces are formally established with the mandate of the Estonian Government, indicating the importance of the issue at hand. The mandate of the Government is essential in giving weight to the task, as well as ensuring political commitment and boosting the motivation of participants to contribute.

Third, Task Forces aim to bring together all relevant stakeholders to secure a comprehensive view of the issue that incorporates the perspectives of various parties engaged with the problem. Lists of Task Force members have been compiled on the basis of input from the Government Office, relevant ministries and Task Force leaders.

¹⁶ Government Office (2017), Directive of the priority goal 12 'Administrative capacity' measure 12.2 'Developing the quality of policy-making', pp. 5-8. Available at: https://www.rahandusministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/2017.12.22_poliitikakujundamise_meetme_tort.004.pdf.

¹⁷ Government Office (2017), Directive of the priority goal 12, 'Administrative capacity'; measure 12.2, 'Developing the quality of policy-making', pp. 5-8.

¹⁸ Action plan for implementation of OECD Public Governance Reviews, Approved by the Cabinet on 13 October 2011.

Fourth, the uniqueness of the Government Task Forces is reflected in the assignment of a separate budget to fulfil their tasks. One of the key factors mentioned by several interviewees that distinguishes Task Forces from earlier efforts is the availability of resources that enable a given policy problem to be tackled systematically and in depth (for example, by conducting necessary analyses). The funding of the Task Forces also allows leaders to be hired to manage their work, steer activities and take charge of achieving the expected outputs.

Fifth, the existence of a leader who did not manage the Task Force as one among many daily obligations, but whose commitment was ensured by financial compensation, was another critical trait. The leader of the Task Force was usually hired by the Government Office, with the exception of the leader of the Task Force on reducing bureaucracy and administrative burden, who was employed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. Having a dedicated leader to manage each Task Force has been an important factor in ensuring that their work is effective and that potential frictions between the competing interests of stakeholders are duly addressed. The administrative support provided by the Strategy Unit of the Government Office has assisted the Task Force leaders in, for example, conducting procurements and following the requirements of ESF funding.

Last but not least, Task Forces are designed to be temporary in nature. This temporariness frames the activities of the Task Forces within a clear timeline and fosters a feeling of urgency that ensures timely results. The maximum duration of a Task Force is limited to 36 months, but as of 2019, all have so far operated for a shorter period¹⁹. The range of activities carried by Task Forces across the programming period 2014-2020, and the eligibility of costs up to 2023 has created a broad window for the initiation and implementation of Task Forces. An example of the creation and structure of a Task Force can be seen in Figure 2.

Government Task Forces in operation: main developments and challenges

The implementation of Government Task Forces soon revealed that, just as the horizontal problems the Task Forces were created to address were multi-faceted and full of nuances, the Task Forces and their key activities materialised differently depending on the task at hand. The aims of the Task Force on injuries and premature death, for example, were to examine the main causes of injuries and premature death, to map preventive activities in this area and to suggest new goals, focus areas, activities and cooperation mechanisms²⁰. The aim of the Task Force on civil protection, meanwhile, was to define the concept of civil protection in Estonia, to distribute responsibility for implementing it, and to come up with a communication strategy to disseminate information on civil protection to society²¹. The selection of topics for Government Task Forces draws on several sources. Topics have emerged, for example, from the need to address an issue crucial to Estonia's long-term development (e.g. the Task Force on skills development, Task Force on injuries and premature death, and Task Force on reducing the burden of care). Topics have also been signalled by interest groups and other coordinating bodies (e.g. the Task Force on funding higher education and research), or the agreed priorities of the governing coalition in power (the Task Force on public sector and social innovation). Variations in the operation of the Task Forces also relate to the specifics of the policy field (e.g. the number of stakeholders, the

¹⁹ Government Office (2017), Directive of the priority goal 12 'Administrative capacity' measure 12.2, 'Developing the quality of policy-making', pp. 5-8.

²⁰ Riigisekretäri käskkiri 'Vigastuste ja vigastussurmade ennetamise poliitika koordineerimise rakkerühma moodustamine' [Directive of the Estonian Secretary of State on establishing the Task Force of injuries and premature death prevention policy coordination]. 09.10.2013, no. 40.

²¹ Riigisekretäri käskkiri 'Elanikkonnakaitse rakkerühma moodustamine' [Directive of the Estonian Secretary of State establishing the Task Force of civil protection]. 15.01.2016, no. 4.

divergence of their interests, as well as preceding developments in the field). For example, according to one interviewee, it was probably much easier to reach a compromise in other policy fields than it was in health, where the relations were predominantly contractual, with the government, medical service providers, professional unions and patient representatives often having conflicting interests. Due to high level of management and professional autonomy among health service providers, reaching a compromise and agreeing on a detailed plan of action was often complicated.

Figure 2. The creation and the structure of the Estonian eHealth Task Force

The Estonian eHealth Task Force was created in July 2014, on the initiative of the Government Office (GO). It operated until November 2015, a total of 17 months. The eHealth Task Force was the first Task Force to be financed from the Operational Programme 2014-2020. Responsibility for leading the Task Force was given to Ain Aaviksoo, a distinguished expert and visionary in the field of health care policy. The GO offered administrative support, and financed both the salary of the leader and the costs of the Task Force from ESF support. The Task Force was organised into a lead group, consisting of 17 representatives, who were top-level civil servants (deputy secretaries-generals of ministries) and heads or CEOs of agencies and professional associations. The list of organisations represented in the Task Force was compiled by the GO in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs. The lead group meetings took place in the GO. The lead group was assisted by six thematic working groups consisting of experts in relevant topics (e.g. services, legal issues, entrepreneurship in health care, IT-architecture). The leaders of the thematic working groups also received a salary financed from ESF support. Over the course of the 17 months, the lead group met on 12 occasions to discuss core issues, take decisions based on inputs from the thematic working groups, and compile the final strategy document.

MEMBER ORGANISATIONS OF THE eHEALTH TASK FORCE

MINISTRIES

The Ministry of Social Affairs
 The Ministry of Finance
 The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Information System Authority

Other Government organisations

The Government Office
 Estonian Health Insurance Fund
 Estonian eHealth Foundation

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS/INTEREST GROUP

Estonian Medical Association
 Estonian Hospitals Association
 Estonian Association of Information Technology and Telecommunications
 The Estonian Society of Family Doctors
 The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People
 The Estonian Service Industry Association

UNIVERSITIES

Technomedicum of Tallinn University of Technology
 The Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tartu

Source: The Estonian Government Office 2014, compiled by the authors.

Nevertheless, interviewees confirm that three core characteristics pertain to the functioning of every Task Force – an attempt to engage the majority of relevant stakeholders; an initiative to map the current situation within the policy field to create a joint information space and reach a shared understanding of the problem; and the aim of producing a binding plan for further work.

The interaction of these three core characteristics also produced several challenges. First, in order to reach a shared understanding of the policy, different perspectives must be embraced, and pressure applied to some stakeholders to modify their positions. Such mediation of interests requires strong leadership and a strategic approach – both in the management of joint discussions, and in individual and informal communication with stakeholders. All of the interviewees maintained that one of the most important factors in the success of a Task Force was choosing a suitable and experienced leader who is able to cope with the complexity of the specific policy field. Such a choice is not always straightforward, but entails a balancing act between professional knowledge, perceived neutrality, previous experience in high office, and leadership abilities. While the majority of leaders served from the initiation of a Task Force to the end of its activities, in one case (the Task Force on funding higher education and research), the leader was replaced on the initiative of the Government Office due to dwindling cooperation. In another case (the Task Force for reducing bureaucracy and administrative burden), the leader resigned as a result of accepting an international consultancy job abroad. In both cases, a new leader was found, carrying the work of the Task Force to its conclusion.

Another challenge relating to the implementation of the Task Forces was that the complexity of the issue and the number of contrasting viewpoints often translated into a very large amount of information and input that needed to be generated and analysed. This often made it difficult to reach concrete agreements on the nature of the problem and to agree a further work plan. However, experience has indicated that making specific settlements on the policy issue and allocating the responsibilities is one of the factors in the success of the Task Forces. As emphasised by Merilin Truuväärt, a former advisor to the Strategy Unit in the Government Office, without such concrete agreements, it is very difficult to continue the work of a Task Force after its conclusion. Furthermore, due to the short lifespan of the Task Forces and their very high workload, the leaders of the Task Forces and the staff of the Strategy Unit sometimes fell behind their initial project timeline. Five of the eight Task Forces needed to extend the deadline for their final reports. One solution for the high workload has been to hire assistants to the Task Force leaders for the duration of the project, through the support of ESF funding. Although the Strategy Unit of the Government Office provided some help in tackling the administrative burden, and sometimes participated as a neutral party in the mediation of interests, the importance of having dedicated administrative support for the Task Force leaders became apparent.

Over the period of the eight Government Task Forces, the question of 'ownership' emerged as one of the central challenges. There were several aspects to this issue. These related to political ownership; the division of responsibility between the Government Office and the leading ministry or ministries; and the sense of ownership on the part of the Task Force leader and stakeholders. The role of the Government Office in relation to the line ministries and their political leaders has emerged as the most substantial issue. Although the Government Office has been the institution responsible for implementing Task Force activity, supported from ESF, and its proximity to the Government has accorded weight and prestige to the Task Forces, it has no leverage over specific public policies in Estonia.

In order for the results of the Task Forces to be implemented in practice, line ministries must take ownership of them. However, achieving a healthy balance between Government Office coordination and ownership by line ministries has been a process involving several trade-offs. Until 2019, the only Task Force fully coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications was the Task Force for reducing bureaucracy and administrative burden. This Task Force was given the task of implementing a cross-sectoral initiative called 'Zero Bureaucracy', which aimed to decrease bureaucratic burden on citizens and make

communication between the government and the public easier and less burdensome²². All other Task Forces were coordinated, and their leaders recruited, by the Government Office (although the Task Force on civil protection was located within the Ministry of Internal Affairs). While the prestige, neutrality and the management of financial resources by the Government Office have facilitated the establishment and functioning of the Task Forces, the central role played by the Government Office may also threaten the sustainability of their results, if the operations of a Task Force become too distant from the relevant ministry and its leaders (both top officials and ministers). For example, at the end of the Task Force on reducing the burden of care, the Ministry of Social Affairs was initially hesitant to take full ownership of the issue due to tensions within the Ministry on the one hand, and the limited funding available to implement the results on the other. Similar strains have also appeared in relation to other issues tackled by the Task Forces.

Conclusions: results, lessons learnt and the role of ESF financial support

Main results

To evaluate the outcomes of Estonia's Government Task Forces, it is necessary to go back to the core traits of the country's system of governance. Estonia is characterised by a segmented administrative structure in which strong ministries supervise their areas of governance in terms of both policy and organisation. This arrangement of a decentralised nature has been shown to exhibit both considerable strengths and considerable weaknesses. On the one hand, clear responsibility over certain policy fields has made it possible to find relatively quick solutions to problems within those fields. On the other hand, this same situation has made it difficult to address problems that span several areas of governance. Such issues defy clear accountability, and can result in clashes between competing institutional agendas. The creation of Government Task Forces is an intervention introduced into the Estonian administrative system with ESF support in an attempt to improve horizontal coordination and strengthen the culture of cooperation.

The 2011 OECD Public Governance Review noted that a great number of cross-sectoral working groups, committees, councils etc. had been established in Estonia. Their effectiveness, however, had been questionable, and evidence was lacking as to the administration's ability to sustain such groups and their work over time²³. Set against this background, the establishment of Government Task Forces has been both an attempt to improve cross-sectoral coordination, as well as to change administrative culture. By 2019, eight Government Task Forces have been created, concluded their work, and presented their results to the Government for approval. This means that in eight crucial policy areas, joint definitions have been agreed and shared agendas have been formulated by stakeholders. Altogether, more than 300 people from public, private and non-profit sectors have been engaged in the activities of the Task Forces, in one way or the other. The experience has changed many of them, giving them new capabilities, contacts and information. Several vital policy problems such as long-term care, premature death and civil protection have been given concrete shape, and have gained the political attention that is a precondition for reforms and investments. The work of the Task Forces has resulted in a number of legislative changes and additional budgetary allocations, as well as clarifying accountability in a number of areas. For example, in the field of e-Health, considerable structural changes followed

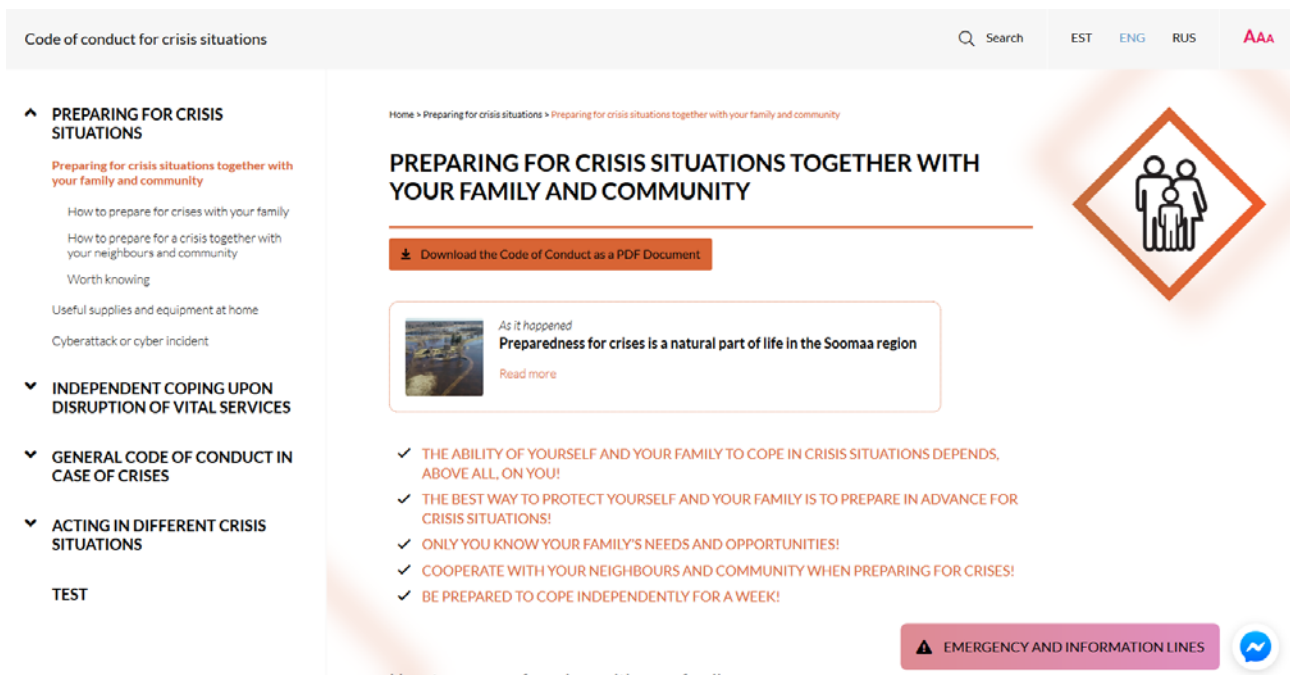
²² The Estonian Ministry of Economic Affairs (2018), Zero Bureaucracy. Available at: <https://www.mkm.ee/et/nullburokraatia>.

²³ OECD (2011), p. 28.

the adoption of the e-Health strategy prepared by the relevant Task Force. The work of the Task Force on the burden of care led to the preparation and adoption of a government action plan to reduce the burden of care and develop a sustainable system of long-term care. Based on the proposals of the Task Force on public sector and social innovation, a joint innovation unit of ministries was established in 2019.

Just as the nature and purpose of Government Task Forces varies, however, so too do the results they achieve. These depend on the task and the time at which the Task Force's work was completed. The first Task Force to complete its activities was the Task Force on skills development. The results of this Task Force led to the adoption of a new methodology for evaluating the skills of the labour force and matching them with the needs of the labour market. A follow-up project was created immediately after Task Force completed its work in 2015, and by 2019 the first stage of a full mapping of the requirements for workforce within different economic sectors had been completed. The mapping will be finalised by the end of 2020. Another good example is the Task Force on civil protection, which succeeded in defining a concept of civil protection in Estonia, and has created a 'Code of conduct for crisis situations' that communicates the key aspects of the concept into a comprehensible document for the wider public (see Figure 3 for an example). Some of the Task Forces that completed their work in 2018 are yet to deliver their long-term results.

Figure 3. Website outlining the code of conduct for crisis situations in Estonia²⁴



Source: www.kriis.ee

²⁴ The 'Code of Conduct for Crisis Situations' is communicated to the public through three different channels: an app „Be ready“ created by the Women’s Voluntary Defence Organization, booklets found in all public libraries and the kriis.ee website shown here.

As emphasised by the interviewees, the real outcomes of individual Task Forces can take some time to appear, particularly when the diversity of interests has led the Task Force to agree on a lowest common denominator or more general, abstract formulations. Members of a Task Force are frequently more pessimistic in their initial evaluations of its results than they are after some time has passed. For example, in the case of the Task Force on the burden of care, generalised nature of the final results meant that in the process of preparing a change of policy, the Ministry of Social Affairs often had to revisit issues that had already been discussed at Task Force meetings, but which had not been fixed in the written agreements. This created frustration and dissatisfaction with the results of the Task Force. However, as Gerli Aavik, adviser in the Ministry of Social Affairs, notes in retrospect, although the Task Force's agreements with regard to the organisation of care in Estonia remained rather general, the existence of such agreements and the process of engaging stakeholders in formulating them have proved invaluable in the preparation of subsequent reforms. Similarly, the leader of the very first Task Force on skills development, Tiia Randma, argued that the real benefits of the Task Forces may appear only when the collaboration initiated by the Task Force continues in a more permanent, institutionalised form (for example, as a steering committee), and when peer-to-peer exchange drives further developments in the field (as has occurred in the area of skills development).

Lessons learnt

Based on the experience and reflections of the interviewees, several lessons can be drawn with regard to the organisation and success of the Task Forces. These can be summarised using six keywords.

- 1) **Leader:** a capable leader who is committed to the Task Force and remunerated for the work is absolutely critical. The leader must have personal influence, at least some expertise in the relevant area, and a standing from which to communicate with politicians and top civil servants. Preferably s/he will have previous experience of working at the level of secretary-general or a deputy secretary-general.
- 2) **Task:** the task or problem assigned to the Task Force must be specific enough to allow it to focus, but general enough to permit creativity. The assignment of the task cannot prescribe solutions, and room must be allowed for deliberation and for innovative approaches to emerge.
- 3) **Results:** concrete agreements on the responsibilities and further division of labour in the policy field must be reached before the end of the Task Force. If the Task Force ends without agreements being fixed, no transformative change can occur.
- 4) **Ownership:** although the Task Forces are usually given the mission of determining responsibility within the specific policy field, the question of where the policy issue will be located after the end of the Task Force must be discussed before it is established. Ownership is crucial.
- 5) **Political interest:** political ownership is vital. There must be Cabinet members who feel responsible for the Task Force and will push for the implementation of its results. To maintain political interest and commitment, regular contact must be ensured with the work of the Task Force.
- 6) **Continuity:** people and links between the temporary Task Force and permanent institutions matter. The knowledge and learning made possible by a Task Force is manifested in individuals who will carry it out in practice. In the best-case scenario,

the leader of the Task Force will also lead the subsequent implementation of its results, and will have a team that relies on its experience of collaboration.

The availability of ESF support, together with the development of the Task Force format over the two programming periods and learning through practice have allowed the Estonian government to develop a functional coordination instrument that is well suited to addressing complex horizontal policy issues of strategic importance. However, the experiences of the eight Task Forces so far also present some dilemmas for the future. As argued by the interviewees, one of the main strengths of the Task Forces has been their combination of several instruments in response to a specific policy problem – remuneration of a project-based leader; financial support for the meetings and exchange; a means of engaging outside expertise; opportunities to draw upon international lessons; the high status accorded by a mandate from the Government, and so on. In the future, it will be important to maintain the Task Forces as an exceptional format reserved for substantial cross-sectional policy problems that require transformative change and the determination of accountability. This means that the establishment of new Task Forces should be driven by tangible policy problems and by the ownership of politico-administrative leaders, not by the format as such. The value offered by Task Forces will only be maintained if the format is not degraded by being used as just another working group or project type. To ensure they are not degraded in this way, a good balance will need to be sought between the role of the Government Office and the ministries in initiating and leading Task Forces. Although the Government Office has acquired a more strategic role in the politico-administrative system since the establishment of its Strategy Unit, the responsibility and resources for the sectoral policies are in the hands of the line ministries. They will need to take the ownership of Task Forces in order to assure the implementation of their results.

Role of ESF support

The interviewees for this case study agreed on one thing – that the invention and establishment of Government Task Forces in this format, and course of their development, was made possible by support from the ESF. In the words of Henry Kattago, Director of Strategy at the Government Office: 'Without ESF support, the Task Forces would not have come into being.' The ESF played a crucial role in funding the 2011 OECD Governance Report²⁵ on Estonia that became the backbone of further public administration development. It also enabled the entrepreneurial leaders of the Government Office to experiment with the first two Task Forces on skills development, and injuries and premature death. The Government's formal action plan to implement the recommendations of the OECD report evolved into a public administration reform plan feeding into the activities financed by the ESF.

Overall, the evolution of Government Task Forces reflects the great significance of the ESF to the development of the Estonian administrative system as a whole. There are several aspects to this. First, the ESF has been the main donor for capacity building within Estonian public administration. Without ESF/ESIF support, 'many of the reforms or other developmental activities of Estonian public administration would not have been started or their implementation would have been slower and much more modest'²⁶. Transversal activities focusing on the

²⁵ Action plan for the implementation of OECD Public Governance Reviews, approved by the Cabinet on 13 October 2011. Accessible at: https://www.riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/oeed_pgc_review_estonia_action_plan.pdf.

²⁶ Pesti, C. and Randma-Liiv, T. (2016), *Role and effect of external support to public administration in Estonia*. EUPACK report, Task 3 (Phase A).

administrative system in its entirety have been at the centre of enhancing administrative capacity in Estonia, and have consumed more than one-third of all support planned and disbursed²⁷. The role of the ESF in administrative development and reform has been so central that the operational programmes, with their requirement for seven-year strategic planning, have in practice largely constituted the Estonian public administration reform programme.

Second, despite the ESF's central role as a donor and the importance of the European Semester's country-specific recommendations, ESF support has been invested in home-grown solutions and initiatives outlined by the Estonian Government²⁸. Within the Government Office, one of the main beneficiaries and implementers of activities to enhance capacity, ESF support has provided funding for interventions that improve the analytical capacity of government institutions, and for instruments that link together different institutions and policy fields, the need for which has been most strongly felt at the centre of government.

Third, the interventions have largely been based on learning through practice, both with regard to the Task Forces as well as in targeting ESF support in general. Over the three programming periods, the focus of ESF support has switched from the capacity of organisations to the capacity of the system. Urmo Merila, Head of the Grant Implementation Department at the State Shared Service Centre, and a key figure in devising and implementing the ESF-funded administrative capacity measures over the three programming periods, explains that during the 2014-2020 period, the emphasis of interventions consciously shifted towards breaking the silos within the administrative system and towards investments in horizontal instruments that contribute to harmonisation and collaboration within the system. Government Task Forces are precisely this type of instrument, and reflect the evolution of ESF support in Estonia from smaller, organisation-centric interventions towards larger interventions with strategic leverage and systemic impact.

Overall, support from the ESF has been critical in reforming Estonia's public administration and enhancing its policy-making capacity. The Government Task Forces exemplify the role played by the ESF in making available targeted funds for structural change. This support has been especially relevant in the context of the systemic transformation that was unavoidable after the change of political and economic regime at the beginning of 1990s, but it is not confined to this context. EU targeted funding that is aimed at raising administrative capacity has generated the stability and provided a healthy distance from political droughts and budgetary competition, in order to create the space and time necessary for change and innovation. Through the fortunate combination of EU resources and local leadership, many transformative changes have been achieved.

²⁷ Pesti and Randma-Liiv, 2016.

²⁸ Pesti and Randma-Liiv, 2016.

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