



Plateforme européenne de la société civile pour l'éducation tout au long de la vie European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL)

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Lifelong Learning in the European Social Fund 2014-2020: a strategic investment

For a year now, negotiations have been on-going in Brussels after the Commission disclosed in October 2011 its draft proposal for the next Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 and led a public consultation in January 2012 on a Common Strategic Framework containing EU's top priorities for all European funds. Representing more than a third of the next Multi-Financial Framework, the future Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund aim at reducing disparities in prosperity and living standards across the EU with more effectiveness via a comprehensive and coordinated investment strategy in line with the EU2020 Strategy objectives. As much as EUCIS-LLL generally rejects the proposed macro-economic conditionalities that could punish beneficiaries for their Member State's mistakes, this position paper focuses more especially on education and training. From the very beginning of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Social Fund has been valuing lifelong learning that counts among the eleven thematic objectives introduced as pre-requisites for EU funding in the new Partnership Contracts. EUCIS-LLL welcomes this continuing effort to promote a holistic vision of lifelong learning and social inclusion, increase the budget allocation for the ESF and implement a partnership approach with stakeholders, including civil society.. In this paper, EUCIS-LLL assesses what key elements of the new European Social Fund should be approved by the Council at the end of the negotiations. EUCIS-LLL also encourages ESF beneficiaries to defend a certain number of aspects at the national level in the design of their national Partnership Contract and Operational Programme.

A coherent and balanced thematic concentration for an impactful implementation of ET2020

1) On the thematic objective on education & training: investing in human capital in line with ET2020 priorities

The strong focus on lifelong learning of the draft European Social Fund 2014-2020 is warmly welcomed by EUCIS-LLL as it reflects the crucial importance of this financial tool to improve education and training systems across the EU. Over the last financial period 2007-2013, the ESF has enabled key actions to support the Education & Training Work Programme 2010 and Strategic Framework 2020 in line with the emphasis on human capital recommended by the Lisbon Strategy. Far more than just a growth plan, the ESF has contributed to tackle early-school leaving, ensure quality education, develop validation systems or promote vocational education¹ – among many other measures that EUCIS-LLL supports. Seeing this sustained political will in the next ESF proposal is therefore very satisfactory: indeed, “Investment in skills, education and lifelong learning” is one of the four thematic objectives among which member states will have to choose to elaborate their Partnership Contract in order to benefit from the ESF (among the eleven that have to be tackled through the Cohesion policy²). Considering that the ESF has been a major funder of lifelong learning in the last two programming periods³, **EUCIS-LLL supports the inclusion of training and vocational training in the objective's denomination** by the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee report.

¹ [Education and Training in the European Social Fund 2007-2013](#), Information service of DG Employment, Social Affairs & Equal Opportunities, Communication Unit, 2007

² [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down common provisions](#) on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund covered by the Common Strategic Framework and laying down general provisions on the ERDF, the ESF and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006, Brussels, 14.3.2012, COM(2011) 615 final/2, Art 9

³ [Evaluation of the ESF support to Lifelong Learning](#), Final Report, Ecorys for the European Commission (August 2012)

Among the three investment priorities declined under this objective, **EUCIS-LLL also welcomes the mainstreaming of most of ET2020 benchmarks by the Commission**, especially on early-school leaving and tertiary attainment that are two EU2020 headline targets. **EUCIS-LLL calls the Council to endorse the developments proposed by the Employment and Social Affairs Committee report for each investment priority to make lifelong learning a reality: first by enhancing lifewide (non-formal and informal) learning** as crucial for the skills upgrade in a learning outcomes approach; second by broadening the scope of investment **by promoting education for all age groups and transitions from education to work**, especially with the actual focus on youth employment and active ageing (in this European Year 2012 and since older workers are the least reached by the ESF - 5% of all participation - for the period 2007-2013⁴). **Access to lifelong learning comes to providing different learning pathways at all stages of life, which is compatible with the labour market relevance of education and training systems.** Indeed, if the ESF is genuinely in line with the “human capital” objective of the ET2020 Strategic Framework, investment priorities should respect the 2009 Council conclusions on ET2020: “*Efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy, at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship*”⁵. **Therefore, in order to implement a coherent and comprehensive approach to ET2020 objectives, EUCIS-LLL calls the Council to support the changes brought by the Employment and Social Affairs Committee on investment priorities. EUCIS-LLL also encourages ESF beneficiaries to urge their government to build a Partnership Contract and related Operational Programme promoting a holistic vision of lifelong learning.**

2) On the global vision for the next ESF: a warm welcome to a stronger emphasis on social inclusion

Moreover EUCIS-LLL like the Employment and Social Affairs & Regional Development Committees welcomes the earmarking of **20% of the ESF for social inclusion**. As this innovation survived the Council Presidency compromise reached in June 2012 on thematic concentration⁶, **EUCIS-LLL calls the Council to entail this measure, as the ESF is a privileged instrument to foster inclusive education & training systems.** Besides, EUCIS-LLL supports the non-discriminatory approach and equal access for disadvantaged groups (and not only Roma as initially proposed) adopted by the Employment and Social Affairs Committee under the thematic objective on education but also mainstreamed in its report, as well as a new emphasis on **gender equality**. Social innovation⁷ is also strongly emphasised in the EMPL Committee report; EUCIS-LLL would like to see this aspect more linked with civil society as **social innovation comes from grassroots initiatives**. That is why **EUCIS-LLL invites ESF beneficiaries to promote a Partnership Contract and Operational Programme valuing social innovation as key to foster inclusive education and training systems and target vulnerable people at risk of educational disadvantage.**

3) On how to concretise it: no thematic objective left behind in the choice of investment priorities

Overall, the proposed thematic concentration is thus satisfactory inasmuch as it will theoretically highlight lifelong learning and key EUCIS-LLL values in line with the ET2020 Strategic Framework. However, **EUCIS-LLL would like to see more guarantees that the lifelong learning thematic objective will be equally favoured compared to the others.** Indeed, the draft proposal says that member states will have to choose up to four investment priorities for their Partnership Contract. While preparing those Contracts, the member states should “take into account the most relevant country-specific recommendations (CSRs) issued by the Council”⁸ (linked to the European Semester). The Presidency compromise recommended taking also into account national and regional needs, the Common Strategic Framework and relevant country-specific recommendations (art 16). Yet only six countries for instance received CSRs to address early-school leaving and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training \(“ET2020”\)](#), 28 May 2009 (2009/C119/02)

⁶ [Cohesion Policy legislative package - Presidency compromise on thematic concentration](#), Brussels, 26 June 2012, 11027/12, ADD 1 REV 2

⁷ See the [General Report of the Public Hearing on Social Innovation in Lifelong Learning](#) of EUCIS-LLL, March 2012

⁸ [Commission Staff Working Document: Elements for a Common Strategic Framework 2014 to 2020: the European Regional Development Fund the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund](#), Part I, Brussels, 14.03.2012, SWD(2012) 61 final

seven on higher education in 2012⁹. How to ensure that member states will invest in lifelong learning? **EUCIS-LLL supports the possibility introduced by the Employment and Social Committee report to focus on up to six investment priorities** (on a total of eighteen covered by the ESF thematic objectives) **with the preliminary consultation of partners**. Yet **EUCIS-LLL regrets that no guarantee has been provided that Member States will have to favour equally the four thematic objectives covered by the ESF**.

Budgetary and implementation aspects: securing the investment and the partnership approach

1) More budget for better education & training systems

EUCIS-LLL welcomes the budget increase for the European Social Fund that should be dedicated 25% (€84 bn) of the cohesion policy budget for the next Multi-Financial Framework, compared to 22% (€75bn) in 2007-2013. The EMPL Committee approved this proposal in its report while the REGI Committee chose to promote a minimum share saying that “at least 25% of the Structural Fund resources for less developed regions [...] shall be allocated to the ESF”. **The Presidency compromise has endorsed those minimum shares for the thematic objectives related to employment, social inclusion and education** (from 20% to 50% according to the regions) in order to “ensure sufficient investment is targeted at youth, employment, knowledge and social inclusion” (Art 84, 3 new)¹⁰. **EUCIS-LLL calls the Council to keep in mind the importance of this financial tool** for the reduction of social disparities in general and the modernisation of education & training systems in particular. Besides, **EUCIS-LLL welcomes an increased use of financial instruments** through specific provisions in the new proposal to encourage Member States and regions to leverage the ESF and thus increase its capacity to finance actions in favour of education, employment and social inclusion.

2) A partnership approach with friendly mechanisms for small civil society organisations

EUCIS-LLL supports local and regional beneficiaries of the ESF that call for the possibility to participate in the design of their Partnership Contract and Operational Programme, as a **partnership approach** in the implementation of EU2020 objectives¹¹ and especially national lifelong learning policies¹² is crucial. **EUCIS-LLL therefore strongly supports the Commission’s efforts to further involve social partners and civil society** in general (in particular NGOs) in all stages of the Partnership Contracts and evaluation of programmes – this through capacity-building, the promotion of a bottom-up approach through community-led local development strategies and a simplified delivery system, especially in less-developed regions and countries. This partnership is an incredible opportunity for stakeholders to bring their input and is **supported by the EMPL Committee report** (especially for NGOs delivering education and training in Article 3) **and recommended by the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee**¹³. Involving relevant stakeholders and easing access for small NGOs is a matter of good governance and **EUCIS-LLL welcomes in that sense the elements for a European Code of Conduct on Partnership**¹⁴ published in April 2012¹⁵ to monitor the follow-up of this political will. This staff working document **recommends the involvement of partners “through the whole programme cycle – preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation”**. Yet **EUCIS-LLL deeply regrets the decision of the REGI Committee to favour local and regional authorities in concluding partnership agreements with their Member State**. Many MEPs disagree with this measure and civil society will be spoiled if this is carried on in

⁹ “[Progress in reducing early school leaving and increasing graduates in Europe, but more efforts needed](#)”, European Commission press release, Brussels, 7 June 2012

¹⁰ [Cohesion Policy legislative package - Presidency compromise on thematic concentration](#), Brussels, 26 June 2012, 11027/12, ADD 1 REV 2

¹¹ “EU committees, to national parliaments and national, local and regional authorities, to social partners and to stakeholders and civil society so that everyone is involved in delivering on the vision” (Communication from the Commission “[Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth](#)”, Brussels, 3 March 2010, COM(2010) 2020 final)

¹² “In the area of lifelong learning, partnership is needed because lifelong learning is a shared responsibility and no actor can achieve a coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning policy alone.” ([Peer learning seminar : critical factors for the implementation of lifelong learning strategies and policies](#) (19-21 May 2010, Vienna, Austria)

¹³ [Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee](#) on the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation, SOC/433, Brussels, 22 February 2012

¹⁴ For more details, see the [ESF webpage](#)

¹⁵ [Commission staff working document](#), “The partnership principle in the implementation of the Common Strategic Framework Funds – elements for a European Code of Conduct on Partnership”, SWD(2012) 106 final, Brussels, 24.04.2012

the negotiations. **EUCIS-LLL invites civil society organisations that benefit the ESF to claim their right to be involved in the programme cycle.** The European Code of Conduct on Partnership is also advising that “*where the number of organisations interested [...] is particularly large, it might be appropriate for potential partners to establish coordination platforms and umbrella organisations*”; EUCIS-LLL supports this initiative and is actually working on National Stakeholders’ Forums¹⁶ to coordinate stakeholders’ dialogue and actions and avoid duplication.

Moreover, EUCIS-LLL like the Parliament report **welcomes the introduction of simplified rules for the reimbursement of projects** through easier delivery mechanisms (i.e. standard scales of unit costs and lump sums), in particular to help small beneficiaries that represent at least 50% of recipients of ESF funding. Yet, as those funds management has proven to remain utterly complex, the Parliament also recommends **a technical assistance** to help those small organisations cope with the consequent administrative burden. For instance, the delay to obtain the funds is very long and administrative and financial controls are still cumbersome. **EUCIS-LLL recommends the smallest beneficiaries to advocate for a broader access to the Fund in their member state’s Operational Programme.**

Recommendations

At the European level, EUCIS-LLL:

- 📌 Supports the will of the European Parliament’s EMPL Committee to implement a lifewide and lifelong approach to learning through the next ESF in line with ET2020 objectives
- 📌 Supports the decision of the European Parliament relevant Committees and the Council to keep the earmarking of 20% of the ESF for social inclusion and to enhance equal access to education
- 📌 Supports the EMPL Committee’s suggestion on a choice of six investment priorities instead of four but regrets that no guarantee is provided for a balanced choice between the four ESF thematic objectives
- 📌 Supports the EMPL Committee in backing an allocation of 25% of the cohesion policy budget for the ESF and calls the Council to entail this proposition
- 📌 Supports the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee that promote the Partnership Approach with stakeholders on the design and implementation of the ESF, and regrets that local and regional authorities are privileged by the Regional Development Committee

At the national level, EUCIS-LLL calls ESF beneficiaries to encourage the design of a Partnership Contract and Operational Programme that:

- 📌 Promote a holistic vision of lifelong learning
- 📌 Promote the earmarking of 20% of the ESF for inclusive education and training systems
- 📌 Ensure a genuine Partnership Approach involving ALL stakeholders at each step of the programme cycle
- 📌 Implement a technical assistance to ease the access to the ESF for small beneficiaries

¹⁶ See the [research work](#) on EUCIS-LLL website