

## Study in Focus: ESF Beneficiaries' Experience

In the wake of the economic crisis, the 2014-2020 programming period brings a number of important changes and challenges for the European Social Fund (ESF). Compared to the previous funding period, the stronger commitment of the Cohesion Policy for inclusive growth and the fight against social exclusion represents one of the major changes in the strategic approach.

In addition, the new legal framework establishes a simplified delivery system for the funds, which covers streamlined implementing rules, the possibility for beneficiaries to carry out all administrative steps electronically, a broadened scope for the use of simplified cost options and the obligation for managing authorities to take specific measures with a view to reducing the administrative burden for beneficiaries.



### Focus of the Study

The overall aim of the study is to assess how and to what extent the changes introduced in 2013 have or have not improved beneficiaries' experience in the implementation of the ESF. Based on desk research, individual interviews and a targeted web survey, it presents:

- the main changes introduced in common and specific regulations for the 2014-2020 funding period, in particular those of direct relevance to beneficiaries;
- an analysis of how the changes affecting beneficiaries have impacted the activities implemented by beneficiary organisations across EU Member States, identifying possible problem areas as well as ways to overcome them, and good practices;
- a list of recommendations for further adaptation of the operating procedures to improve intervention effectiveness post-2020.

Five countries were selected for detailed country cases: France, Germany, Italy, Romania, and Spain.

### Key Findings

- The **simplification measures introduced** in the 2014-20 programming period, although perceived as positive by the majority of respondents and interviewees, **do not change the overall perceptions of a regulatory framework still very complex**, both for managing authorities and for ESF operators, especially in the case of NGOs and small local administrations.
- According to stakeholders surveyed, the **most problematic aspects** regarding the application process and project preparation are **monitoring, reporting and archiving requirements**, and the administrative and financial management of the activities. There are, however, some differences among respondents, according to their role in the ESF programmes.
- **Access to ESF funding** is considered **particularly difficult for NGOs** and local public administrations which represent the largest group of ESF beneficiaries in the social inclusion thematic objective. This is mainly due to the lack of communication on the funding opportunities and the lack of guidelines with clear parameters and instructions on financial and performance reporting requirements.



- In addition, web-based applications and management systems are not well designed and often make access difficult as rules are not always clear and guidelines are often updated in the course of the process. Attention to these issues and the use of technologies and e-learning in the ESF delivery may increase the transparency, access and interest among the target beneficiaries.

The **country cases** report examples of **good practices**: in **Spain**, the creation of a Quality System which requires the evaluation of all the implemented training actions, in order to learn from good practices and promote changes in the requirements; in **Romania**, the setting up of information sessions with both potential applicants and beneficiaries to contribute to increasing implementation capacity and to prevent irregularities; in **France**, the Europ'Act programme to facilitate State-Regional coordination especially in remote regions; in **Italy**, the implementation of MAs' web portals and assistance to beneficiaries provided by regional thematic officers either by telephone or email.

The study identifies a list of **challenges for the post-2020 programming period**, which are of particular relevance for the ESF beneficiaries.

- **Administrative burdens** continue to be considered an important challenge for ESF beneficiaries. Lower administrative burdens and simplification of processes, also in order to reduce payment delays, are strongly advocated to support access and participation in ESF interventions for the post-2020 programming period.
- **Social innovation** is considered another important challenge for the post-2020 period by all the stakeholders interviewed. However, the implementation of social innovation projects often clash with rules and administrative systems that were designed for 'traditional' vocational training actions.
- The **risk of substantial budget cuts post-2020**, due to Brexit and the emergence of new priorities such as defence and external security.

## Recommendations

Among the indications emerging from the reviewed documents and interviews, the following are the most common:

- **Simpler governance structures**, a lower number of intermediate bodies and a clearer definition of roles across institutional levels;
- **Strengthening the partnership** and consultation between **public bodies, beneficiaries, experts** and civil society actors involved in ESF;
- **Fewer, clear and stable rules**;
- **Increased use of simplification options**, and particularly the use of SCOs that have proven to be effective for ESF interventions and beneficiaries;
- **Improved capacity building at national and local level** addressing both programme managing bodies and beneficiaries with training measures, technical assistance and exchange of experience in targeted meetings and workshops, as used in the ESF Thematic Network on Simplification.

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