

ESF COMMITTEE AD-HOC GROUP ON THE FUTURE OF THE ESF

Draft overview of the discussions on the ESF European Added Value and Geographical Coverage

Brussels, 18 December 2009

The first meeting of the Ad-Hoc Group on the future of the ESF took place in Brussels on 18 December 2009. It was attended by experts from 20 MS and the European social partners (European Trade Union Confederation, Business Europe and the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises). Participants who were not able to attend the meeting will be given the opportunity to react at the next meeting of the Ad-Hoc Group on the issues of geographical coverage and added value (Brussels, 20/01/2010).

This being the first meeting, some time was first used to clarify the ad-hoc group's mandate and procedures. The discussions covered three broad themes defined by sets of questions in the issue paper. A number of points that were raised but not discussed are also listed.

Clarification of the Mandate and working procedures of the Ad-Hoc Group,

The Ad-Hoc group on the future of the ESF has been set up at the request of the ESF Committee.

- The mandate is to discuss the objectives and scope of the future ESF, its geographical coverage, delivery modes and instruments, the complementarities with other Community instruments and its added Value. Others topics may be added if deemed relevant;
- The purpose of the Ad-Hoc Group is to provide a forum for informal discussions on the future of the ESF. The members of the Ad-Hoc Group are experts nominated by the MS and the social partners. They are not sent to present and defend formal positions. They are sent to a specific meeting for their personal knowledge and expertise on the subject to be discussed;
- No formal minutes will be taken from the meetings. Instead, the Commission which acts as secretary to the Ad-Hoc Group will produce overviews of the points discussed. Ad-Hoc Group members will have the opportunity to comment on the draft overview.
- Prior to each meeting the Commission will circulate a paper identifying the major issues associated with the subject to be covered. The documents will be circulated as soon as they become available;
- An interim report will be prepared for the meeting of the ESF Committee in March 2010. The final report of the ad-hoc group should be presented to the ESF Committee in June 2010.

Theme 1 – A common framework to describe the European Added Value

- A majority of experts felt that the European Added Value of the ESF is evident and beyond doubt (or self-evident). The added value discussion needs to be differentiated according to the MS and the level of action –European / national / regional. Evidence for EAV of past or current ESF programmes is to be found in evaluation reports and studies.
 - *In general, experts agreed on the need to describe and demonstrate the EAV of the ESF.*
- There was a broad consensus that there is no single definition of the EAV. Therefore a common framework such as the one proposed by the Commission to describe the EAV is useful. However other aspects of the EAV mentioned, such as the partnership principle, the flexibility of the instrument, transnationality, territorial cohesion, coherence between different kind of actions and mutual learning; need to be taken into account more explicitly.
 - *The key dimensions of EAV are: 1) the relevance to Union policy objectives; 2) subsidiarity and most importantly 3) the expected effects and delivery mechanisms. The expected effects themselves can be described in terms of volume (doing more), scope (broadening of actions), process (how we do it – including the application of the partnership principle, the long-term perspective, the flexibility of the instrument) and role (learning, innovation, multiplier, agenda setting).*
 - *For the future ESF it is vital to link it clearly to the EU 2020 strategy.*

Theme 2 – Aspects of EAV in the MS

- Experts stressed different aspects of the ESF EAV illustrating thereby the earlier conclusion that there is no single definition of CAV. These aspects essentially related to the type of effects achieved:
- **Process effects**, especially partnership and governance (transparency, evaluation, control), were particularly stressed. EAV of the ESF lies also in the link between policies (f.i. employment and education) and actors (f.i. municipalities in the case of youth unemployment in one MS or social partners).
- **Role effects**: the ESF has been and remains an instrument for mutual learning, for the development of tools and methods which are then mainstreamed into national or regional policies (f.i. integration pathways, quality assurance systems...).
- **Scope effects**: The ESF makes it possible to bridge gaps in national policy funding. As these gaps tend to be recognised and addressed, the EAV can only be maintained if the ESF is allowed to move on, to address a succession of gaps during the programming period (policy roller-coast).
- **Volume effects** were relatively less frequently cited, though taken as granted and acknowledged as being important particularly in less-prosperous Member States.
- A number of experts referred to the policy relevance of the ESF. EAV lies in making Treaty provisions concrete (such as on equal opportunities or gender mainstreaming). It also increases coherence between policies at EU and MS levels.

- *The EAV aspects that were most stressed are the process effects (in terms of how things are done and how actors get involved) and the role effects (in terms of learning, innovation, multiplier, and agenda setting).*
- The emphasis on audit and the complexity of the regulation are seen as the major factors hampering Community Added Value. One expert mentioned previous bad experience as a factor limiting take up as potential providers are reluctant to make use of the ESF.

Theme 3 – Differentiating ESF between MS

- There was a general consensus that differentiation needs to be discussed in terms of volume (level of co-financing) and scope (what can be done).
 - *The experts favoured an instrument open to all MS even though levels of support might be differentiated between Member States.*
- The discussion focused on the level of differentiation in terms of scope. Some experts expressed the need to have a set of core actions compulsory for all as opposed to the option of having individual negotiations between the Commission and each MS; others favoured a menu of priorities from which to choose, while discussing how extensive this "menu" should be. One expert pointed out that if the expected European Added Value resides essentially in role and process effects, there is no point in differentiating content between MS.
 - *In general, the experts felt that the future ESF should not impose things but leave room to respond to specific national (or regional) needs. Nevertheless, several experts stressed the need to have common objectives or priorities particularly if the ESF is to operate across the EU and that some focus or concentration is needed. A limited number of common priorities may be counterbalanced with a greater freedom as to how to implement them.*

Other points raised

During the discussion a number of points not directly related to the issues on the agenda were raised. They are listed below for the record and because the Ad-Hoc Group may wish to discuss them in future meetings.

Issues raised	Possible session for discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relation to other Community instruments; 	Complementarity and relation to other EU Instruments (ERDF, EGF, LLL programme, ...)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ESF is a people oriented instrument; • Having different objectives in one MS is an unnecessary complication when pan-national issues are addressed. • The need to balance sectoral and territorial interests and hence level at which OPs are situated (at MS or lower); • The too large gap between the strategic documents and the OPs; 	Future objectives, priorities or scope

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility of the future ESF in times of crisis/unforeseen situation 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cumbersome implementation set-up • The need to focus more on results and achievements and away from procedures; • Ensuring more flexibility of delivery mechanisms for dealing with short-term challenges 	Delivery modes and instruments