



E.A.R.L.A.L.L VIEWS ON THE REFORM OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND AND ACTION TO BUILD A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY

Introduction

This document represents the collective views of 18 regional governments from 9 countries across Europe which constitute the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning. It is the result of discussions at the EARLALL General Assembly meeting in Cardiff on 24th to 25th September 2003

The Association strongly believes that regional governments have an important role to play in the development and implementation of European policies for education and training which it sees as central to the building of a knowledge-based society.

The aim of this document is therefore to set out the EARLALL position as to the principles that should underpin the future shape of EU social policy post 2006. The EARLALL therefore urges the EU to take into account:

- *That the objectives of the Structural Funds are simplified so that the ESF becomes dedicated to support the development of a knowledge-based society in all European Regions, in compliance with the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe dated 07/18/2003.*
- *That the ESF promotes strategies that establish integrated and coherent educational-, labour market- and enterprise policies as a framework for lifelong learning both at European, national and regional levels.*
- *That the ESF promotes partnerships between public authorities, private and public enterprises as well as research and educational institutions to carry out these actions in reality for the benefit of both citizens, enterprises and society in general.*
- *That the ESF includes actions to upgrade the whole work force, both employed and unemployed people.*
- *That the ESF promotes international co-operation at regional and local level to increase the added value and synergy of initiatives undertaken in each region*

This proposal will be elaborated in the following text in which the Association has taken into account the dynamic political development in the European Union as follows:

- The enlargement of the EU and the associated need to implement measures that build social cohesion throughout the continent;
- The new European Employment Strategy
- The progressive regional approach in implementing European policies and strategies in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity;
- The Lisbon challenge of making Europe a world-reference knowledge-based economy by promoting social development and high quality employment;
- The globalisation of our economies and increasing pace of economic and social



restructuring as well as technological change

EU Structural Funds Reform – key principles

1. The next period of structural funds – 2007 to 2013 – will be set in the broader context of 25 Member States of the EU with various needs but with common goals.
2. Investment in lifelong learning is among the priorities of the European Employment Strategy and EARLALL believes that such investment is vital to achieving a high skill, high value and socially cohesive economy which competes with the rest of the world on quality.
3. For this reason EARLALL members believe that the debate on structural funds reform must focus on, among other issues, the building of capacity of lifelong learning in accordance with policies and strategies on education and training that are being developed.
4. The Association regards this as a fundamental requirement if Europe is to establish a knowledge-based society and guarantee social cohesion in the future.

The Regional Dimension

- 5.1 In compliance with art. 158 of the European Treaty, policy for social cohesion focus on the regional level rather than on member state level.
- 5.2 Raising educational and skills standards, is central to reducing regional disparities as many of the least developed regions are characterised by low skills attainment. In the lagging regions more investment will be necessary in human resources and infrastructure more closely.
- 5.3 This implies full acknowledgement of the regional role in planning and managing the implementation of European policy in this field. The Regions are in a favourable position for adapting the developing to their own needs by using their competencies as public authority, as public enterprise and as co-ordinator of regional initiatives.
- 5.4 The ESF should promote the establishment of a coherent framework in each region to integrate enterprise, labour market and education- and research policies.
- 5.5 The ESF should encourage the establishment of partnerships at a regional level between public authorities, private and public enterprises, trade unions and employers' organisations, as well as research and educational institutions to implement these policies in reality for the benefit of both citizens, enterprises and society in general.
- 5.6 The EU Cohesion policy should encourage co-operation on education and training matters between European regions.



Assuring Resources to develop a Knowledge-based Society

- 6.1 The objectives of the Structural Funds should be simplified so that the ESF becomes dedicated to supporting the development of a knowledge-based society in all European Regions.
- 6.2 In accordance with cohesion policy and the principle of solidarity, co-operation between European regions at international level must be guaranteed and supported by means of structural funds orientated towards the needs and plans of the regions.
- 6.3 Dedicated multi-annual resources that allow for long term planning at regional level must be provided for the creation of a knowledge-based society.
- 6.4 The aim must be to aggregate resourcing for skills development at European, national and regional levels and to focus investment on the particular lifelong learning needs of each region.
- 6.5 Therefore EU Member States should be urged to allocate adequate resources to complement EU structural funding in order to build a knowledge-based society based on lifelong learning.
- 6.6 The Regions themselves are in the best position to ensure that the allocations from the structural funds are adapted to the Regions' needs.

Planning and integration

- 7.1 There is a serious need for simplification of procedures and reduced bureaucracy regarding access to regional development funding. This should help increase participation from the most vulnerable groups and communities who often have very little capacity but great need. The procedures must be revised and the focus at the European level should be on quality control and on the co-ordination of regional policy.
- 7.2 Steps must be taken in the next planning period in order to raise standards, improve access to learning and stimulate demands for learning by both individuals and enterprises.
- 7.3 The reform of the structural funds must aim at promoting integration between EU, national and regional financing sources and with regional policies and plans.
- 7.4 In compliance with their strategic policy development role the regions will need to establish coherence and integration between EU regional policies and domestic funding initiatives. It is anticipated that EU regional policy would be implemented through devolved regional strategies which should be tailored to the lifelong learning needs of the region.



- 7.5 Plans to support Learning should be more closely related to innovation in production and the local knowledge-based development needs. The regions are particularly well placed to realise these plans, as they already play a strategic role both in respect of training and local development. Integration must apply to all aspects of support, with particular reference to the training/development axis.
- 7.6 Regional policy to build a knowledge-based society must maintain and enhance a specific degree of pan-European planning and must have specific safeguards to achieve consistency.
- 7.7 Regional Operational Plans are the appropriate tool to implement regional strategies which are aimed at achieving European goals.
- 7.8 The Regional Operational Plans should integrate enterprise-, labour market- and educational- and research policies in the Regions. These Plans should make specific reference to lifelong learning.

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- 8.1 The knowledge based society will generate a constant process of change to which citizen and workers will have to adapt. Everybody will need basic educational skills in particular in IT and foreign languages to deal with these changes.
- 8.2 Steps must therefore be taken in the next planning period to raise standards, improve access to learning and stimulate demand for learning for both individuals and enterprises.
- 8.3 Reform of the structural funds might specify key contents to be included in all such Regional Plans as follows:
 - (a) how the Plan will support the development of a knowledge-based economy and society;
 - (b) how different elements in the delivery of learning throughout life will be integrated;
 - (c) how actions to improve educational, training and work standards will be integrated;
 - (d) how access to learning will be improved – particularly by means of Information and Communication Technology;
 - (e) how the range of learning provision will be enhanced;
 - (f) how provision will become more customer-focused and demand-sensitive;
 - (g) how information, advice and guidance services to support learning will



be established or improved;

- (h) how the principles of partnership and subsidiarity in decision-taking will be applied;
- (i) how E-government will be advanced and bureaucracy reduced; and
- (j) how international and interregional co-operation and cohesion will be promoted.

Brussels, 18/3/2004